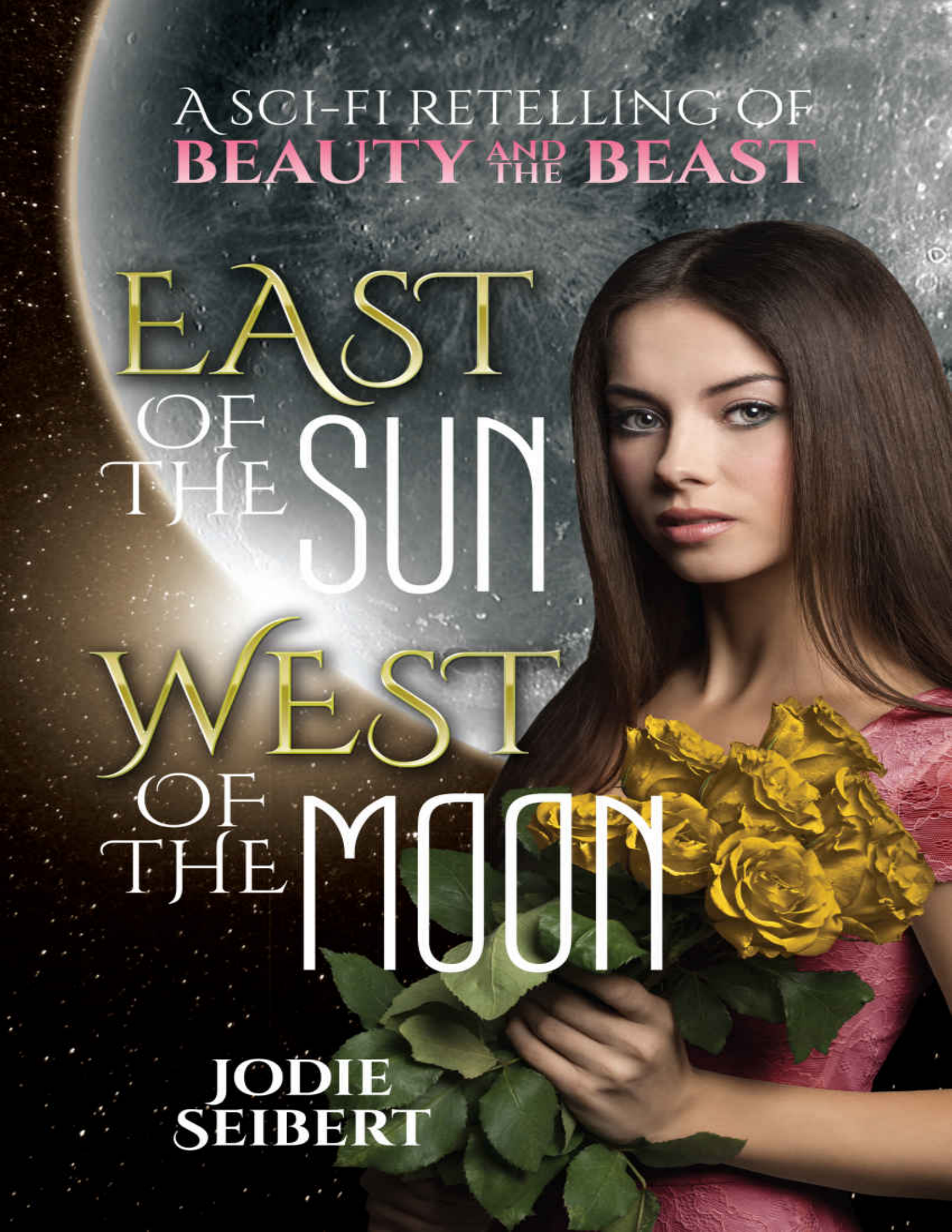
A SCI-FI RETELLING OF
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

EAST OF THE SUN WEST OF THE MOON



JODIE SEIBERT

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To my children: May they learn to give many moments and memories and much time and talent to all those they love. May they learn that such things cost nothing and yet cost everything.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27

Chapter 28
About the Author

PART 1:
Peaks of Eternal Light

Chapter 1

She used to wonder what she missed most about her life on Earth, whether it was the sun's beauty revealed only at sunrise and sunset—which only an atmosphere can truly capture—or the roses. But when Varda saw the strange rose clutched in her father's hand she knew it could only be the roses.

He had come back to Peary Base unexpectedly; later than if he had merely been unsuccessful, but sooner—at least sooner than what she thought—than if he had found what they were hoping for. Something was dreadfully, terribly wrong: she had heard it in his voice as he spoke to the lunar space traffic controller as he went through the steps to enter the base—maneuvering the lunar flyer through the airlock and the decontamination chamber and then into the hangar—and she had seen it in his face when he descended from the flyer, after he was cleared—at last—to leave.

Eyes staring straight ahead, Xenos had given a monotone greeting to Varda—a few words and a lifeless embrace—words as mechanical as those he had spoken to the on-duty controller, as if he were a computer operating on autopilot.

Even stranger was what he had been holding: the knitted scarf she had made for him to remind him of her mother, with its subtle and simple embroidered pattern of open lilies that looked more like six-pointed stars, pale gray thread on dark gray yarn. It was wrapped carefully around something long and slender and larger on the top end. But she had said nothing to him until they got back to their cramped quarters—she had to press his palm to the door scanner as he seemed unable—and he was seated in the best—well, the least shabby, anyway—of their two chairs.

He seemed to be in shock, and she didn't think he even realized he held the scarf and its secret in his hand. Varda knelt before him, carefully unwrapped what seemed to be the top of the object, and then gasped at the impossibility within.

It was a rose, more golden than the sun, like no color she had ever seen on a living plant, with brass, bronze, and brown tones. She had to touch the petals to assure herself that it was real and not fashioned of burnished gold. It was: with petals soft as velvet, though they drooped a little, probably from the pressure of his hand on the stem and from being

wrapped for who knew how long in the heavy knit scarf. She wondered how he had gotten it—for there were no rosebushes on the Moon, and he could not have been on the Earth. Varda knew roses, she loved roses, and none had ever been genetically modified to be this unique golden hue. Green roses and black roses and gray roses could now be bought, but she didn't know anyone who had ever seen anything like this.

Her father finally reacted when she gently unfolded his clenched fingers. He dropped the rose and shuddered violently, as if he were suddenly waking from a dream—or a nightmare—and found himself back in a cold, harsh reality that was somehow even worse. Xenos leaned forward then and stared at the rose where it had fallen between her knees, petals gracefully open, as if the rose itself was pointing at her. It almost felt like some kind of sign, but perhaps it was merely the fraught atmosphere of the room, and Varda shuddered too as she felt her blood turn cold, as if her heart had somehow stopped.

"Where did you get this rose?" she asked at last, once her shaking had subsided.

He swallowed, and, in a voice closer to his own, said, "I stole it."

Xenos leaned forward, head sinking onto his hands, and Varda could get no more words out of him, not for the rest of that day and not for the rest of that night.

Chapter 2

Varda walked beside Xenos as they approached the malfunctioning solar panels. He was quiet, which was not unusual for anyone on a moon walk: it was hard enough to walk in the awkward suits, and harder still to walk in minimal gravity. She kept her eyes on the ground, following her shadow, following his, the sun at their backs.

On the rim of Peary Crater, between two similar craters—one on the side facing Earth, one on the side facing away from Earth—are a series of high places known as the peaks of eternal light. It was a poetic appellation, but it was also true, and it was the reason for the existence of Peary Base, situated at the center of the peaks in a third crater, close to the lunar north pole. Huge solar arrays lined the peaks, angled toward the sun. But as often happened, something had broken, and a hundred panels were askew, the motor that controlled them all having failed.

Normally a colonist would fix the panels, but the ones with the right experience were all busy with other jobs, and no one would be able to come out for at least eight earth-weeks, so the Lunar Group deemed it an emergency, allowing anyone who could fix it the chance to earn more silvers. And Xenos needed the money fixing the solar panel would provide. It was hazard pay after all, four times what he would otherwise make. She too would make hazard pay, but far less, for she was not an electromechanical engineer like her father.

Xenos set down his repair case near the rotating base of the main solar panel and motioned to Varda to help him. This is what she was there for. While the panel was not heavy, it was large, far too large for one person to easily maneuver. With the panel out of the way, Varda watched as he inspected the mechanism beneath. After carefully looking over the inside, he chose several tools and began to work. Normally, he would be talkative, telling her what he was doing in words she could partly understand, but he was as silent as the landscape. He had said little since that night four earth-days ago. He had told her nothing of his journey, just the few words in reply to her question about the rose. She had asked again about the rose, where he had gotten it, and why he had stolen it, for she knew her father to be an honorable man, but his only words had been to show no one else the rose. There had been no one to show it to anyway. And besides, it would soon be irrelevant. Like any other rose cut from its source of life, the

strange golden rose would wilt, its petals would turn a dull brown, all bright color gone, soon no different from any other dead rose. But she could still see it in her mind, as lovely as a sunset, and she smiled. Somehow the fact that its beauty was so fleeting made it more precious. She had wanted rose seeds, but her memory of the rose would have to do.

A gloved hand on her shoulder interrupted her thoughts. Startled, Varda looked at her father. She saw herself reflected in the gold-coated outer sun visor on his helmet, the visor that protected one's eyes from extreme amounts of both visible and invisible light, and knew he would see himself reflected in her visor. Gesturing to let her know that he was done, he motioned for her to help him place the panel back on. She smiled as she helped him, even though she knew he could not see it. Her father was skilled: what would be a day's full work for anybody else he could get done in a fraction of the time. A few quick adjustments later, the motor kicked in, and she watched as the hundred solar panels turned once more toward the sun. Varda breathed a sigh of relief—the whole excursion had taken less than an earth-hour, which meant radiation exposure was minimal, indeed, not even enough to really worry about—as Xenos gathered his equipment and headed to the lunar rover. He still said nothing as she sat beside him in the vehicle as it drove quietly and quickly toward the base. She wished he would talk to her. It worried her.

It wasn't the only thing that made her uneasy. He had told her he was thinking about signing on with several of the larger helium-3 mining groups, something he had said he would never do. Going out once every four earth-months to empty his own small helium-3 collection vehicle—made of spare parts fixed during spare time—and use the payload to help lower his debt was one thing, this was another. Robots could help, but they could not do everything. Even at high pay most found such a thing not worth it. Outside of the bases—shielded by a thick layer of lunar regolith—anyone was vulnerable to solar radiation. Though suits provided some protection, and rovers provided even more, it was not enough. There was no atmosphere on the Moon to provide natural protection. Laws regulated how much exposure was allowed, but, like many laws, they were generally not enforced if a person chose the risks. Those outside the bases were also vulnerable to the effects of low gravity. Most of these problems could be lessened—and a few could be cured—with medical treatment, but helium-

3 miners generally lived shorter, unhealthy lives, much like the coal miners did many millennia before on Earth.

Varda did not want her father to die an early death. She had already lost her mother, and did not know if she could bear to lose her father as well.

“I miss your mother so very much,” her father said, breaking the silence abruptly, startling Varda so much she nearly jumped in her seat. It was uncanny sometimes how he knew her thoughts, but Xenos had sometimes known her mother’s thoughts, and he certainly knew his own, and Varda knew herself to have the traits of both, so perhaps it shouldn’t surprise her.

Xenos stopped the rover before the entrance to the base, and she realized he was staring at Earth, visible just over the horizon. Though both the Sun and Earth were always low on the horizon when viewed from the peaks of eternal light, only the Sun appeared to move around them, and in two earth-weeks it would be in the exact opposite direction. Earth, however, always appeared to her as if it was either just rising or just setting, as if the Earth itself could not decide between the two, and so rotated quickly between them, moving just below and just above the horizon in an almost imperceptible oval shape. White clouds swirled over its surface, and Varda could see the slightest hint of green in a break in the clouds. After staring at the desolation and barrenness of the gray lunar landscape, as desolate and barren as the Earth’s own polar regions, Varda was glad to see signs of plant life. Perhaps somewhere down there in that vast swath of land were the very gardens and forests and meadows she and her mother had both loved.

The view was so beautiful she found she could not turn away, and as her father drove the rover to go back inside she watched the Earth until it disappeared. And for a moment she imagined the entire lunar landscape had turned as golden and gleaming as the rose, lit by more than the sun, lit as if from within.

Chapter 3

The low whir of the air recirculation system filled the air, and moments later Varda felt the first soft breeze hit her flushed cheeks. She briefly closed her eyes at the gentle sensation, before picking up her steps. Her father was supposed to return from helium-3 collection by the end of that earth-day, and she was hoping she could finally persuade him to talk. Almost eight earth-weeks had passed since he had first come back, and he had been home only rarely, and then he had been silent. She didn't want to force a confidence, and she had hoped that he would talk on his own, but she couldn't wait much longer. There were things she needed to ask. Was the cargo truly, irretrievably lost? Where had he gotten the rose? Why had he stolen it? Surely there was some way to make amends with the owner of the golden rose for its theft, wherever they were.

As Varda walked through the base toward her family's quarters, she took her customary route through the public arboretum and park. Plants were grown all throughout the many domes that comprised the base—nearly every building had planter boxes of fruits and vegetables on balconies and roofs—but only the arboretum contained trees. But, like everything on the base, even the arboretum served a practical purpose, its plants chosen for their ability to contribute to the oxygen supply, and for their ability to remove carbon dioxide. There were no flowers on the base, and certainly no roses. It would be a waste of resources.

Every life support system on the Moon had at least one secondary system. The air supply system had four, which included hydroponics and the arboretum. Water, which cycled through the base's reclamation station, came primarily from Thule Base, situated not far from Peary Base at the craters of eternal night, which were abundant sources of water ice. Energy, which was saved in direct-current batteries, came primarily from Peary Base, though each base also had solar arrays, to take advantage of the two earth-weeks of light—one lunar day—before the two earth-weeks of night—one lunar night.

The dual gravitomagnetic and diamagnetic field generator—housed both beneath and above the base—was also important, for it boosted the weak lunar gravity to earth-normal levels, and would only be shut off in cases of extreme emergency. Varda, like all Moon colonists, knew the location of all of these systems, and more. But Varda was not a colonist.

She had been a tourist, daughter of a rich man, but when the ship had been lost her father had been left with nothing, having put all his assets into that shipment to the Moon. The risk should have paid off, but a mechanical failure—cause unknown—during turning maneuvers near Medii Docking Station had severed communication with the spaceship's engine, and all twenty-four cargo containers connected to it had veered off. Space traffic control at Medii Base used radar to track it as long as they could until it flew out of range, all the way to the far side of the Moon, presumably crashing there, having been caught by the Moon's weak gravity. Flight-path coordinates helped them narrow the search area to approximately 40,000 square miles, but satellite images proved to be no help, and it was agreed that it had probably crashed deep inside one of the many craters found there, and was now obscured by dust. The only hope her father had then had was that one of the transponders was still working. But he had few silvers, no real way to pay for an extensive search. No one else was willing to put up the funds. Indeed, most thought he was a fool for even hoping the ship and its cargo were in salvageable shape. There had been only one option left, to re-task four ancient solar-powered, unmanned rovers—some of the few things he still owned—to search the area for the transponder signal, instead of their usual job of searching for helium-3. Eight months ago one of these was lost, leaving just three. And two months, two earth-days ago the signal had come at last, and her father had set out on his ill-fated journey.

She had worried about him when he left. The last crash he had viewed was the one that had killed her mother. It was different, of course—all cargo-only flights were unmanned, sparing Xenos the guilt she knew he would have felt at any deaths, so similar to her mother's own last moments—but memories could obscure reality, even in the most level-headed people.

Her mother was why Varda came so often to the arboretum. It was how she faced her own memories, how she dealt with her own sadness. Sometimes she came there during the night and allowed herself to cry until the tears washed away the pain, if only long enough for her to go back to her quarters and sleep.

She wished she could be alone right then, but she wasn't the only one there. Anything that reminded people of Earth was popular, and so dozens of colonists were milling about in small groups of friends or families,

quietly talking to each other. No one would ever be fooled, of course, but Varda found she loved it just the same. She would spend hours wandering the paths or sitting on the benches made of lunar regolith. Evergreens, oaks, maples, firs, alders: Varda loved them all. She even loved the tall tropical grasses that ringed the trees, though they looked strange to her. The park was also one of the few places that had abundant soil, brought at great expense from Earth. Most of the other plants relied on hydroponics and aquaponics. Too bad she couldn't work there.

Those were well-paid jobs, and would help pay down her father's debt, but such jobs were not available to her father, and would not be available to her when she came of age. She was not a colonist; she had not been recruited from Earth by the Lunar Group, hired for her skills. She did not have a contract. She was not even the child of a colonist, with access to education and the possibility of being hired.

Varda had few choices. She considered herself lucky that she had been able to secure a few hours work that earth-day in the food service department. The colonist contracted for the work had wanted the day off, and had not wanted to pay another worker the full pay they would have demanded, at least not when Varda would accept quarter wages.

Cooking was one of the few skills Varda possessed. A year ago, recently impoverished and desperate for any kind of job, she had volunteered for free, showing the then-skeptical colonists that she could work hard, that she was more than just the previously pampered daughter of a rich merchant. That, and the fact that she sought so little pay, meant that occasionally—sometimes more than occasionally—one of the colonists in food service threw some work her way when they wanted or needed some time off.

Besides subcontracting for a colonist, there were only four other ways for her or her family to truly live on the Moon. The first was if there was some kind of emergency and there was no one else with the skills to fix it right then, much like she and her father had done when he had fixed the solar panel.

The second was to barter your skills or sell things you owned directly to the colonists and the tourists. But the main talent she had was of little use on the Moon—Earth's upper class children could choose whether they wanted to work or not—and she had studied sewing and clothing design, along with basic homemaking skills. Still, she was adept at other—more

useful—things. Many times she had been able to remove set-in stains and repair ragged rips in a favorite outfit of a colonist. There had even been a few requests for the finer jobs—a knitted scarf, a crocheted blanket, an embroidered gown—but hand-made things were luxuries, and her supplies were dwindling fast, and she lacked the silvers needed to replenish them.

The third was to marry a colonist or tourist. Her sisters—having been dumped by their fiancés after their impoverishment—were desperately trying for this one, with little success. Few colonists seemed to consider them serious marriage material, and Varda occasionally heard them speaking in more than disparaging terms of the Gray twins, saying they were interested only in gowns and gems and gossip. Few tourists seemed to consider them serious marriage material either, though that was mostly because they themselves were upper class, and were often uninterested in those who were not. Not only the fiancés, but all her sisters' friends had abandoned them after the loss of the ship. Still, Varda herself could marry, as she would be old enough by the end of the year. But she could not leave her father to face the debt alone, and she doubted a husband would take on the responsibility, even if he could afford it, and she would not want to put such a burden on him anyway. And she could not bear to marry just for need, for that would be fair to neither of them; she could only marry out of love.

The fourth was to mine for helium-3, highly desired on Earth—where it was extremely rare—to fuel their fusion reactors. Many colonists had a small helium-3 collection vehicle like her father, passively mining the top layer of regolith. Going out three times a year for a day or two to pick up a meager payload posed little hazard. Serious mining, the kind that netted dozens or hundreds or thousands of times that amount, the kind that made you wealthy: that required workers on the surface of the Moon. Due to the hazardous nature of the job, full-time miners were always wanted. Anyone that wanted to mine was allowed to mine, provided you had at least some combination of the right supplies, skills, strength, and stamina. Even if she had some of those, Varda had learned that she would be unlikely to respond to the medical treatment for long-term exposure. She couldn't even take the injection that mostly compensated for the changes in gravity, at least not without becoming very ill. But her father could.

She sighed. She had tarried long enough. She took one last look at the trees, stared at the domed ceiling for a few more moments—the sky

simulator showed clouds slowly floating across the surface—and headed home.

The walk back was long—she did not want to waste funds on transport—and, reaching her quarters at last, the tired and achy Varda longed for some rest before her father came back, and reached out to press the door scanner.

“Little sister! There you are!” The voice belonged to Atara.

“We’ve been waiting for you!” That voice belonged to Ozara.

The twins shared the same black-brown hair and clear green eyes that had belonged to their mother. But that was where the similarity ended. Atara—the eldest of the two by four minutes, and eight years older than Varda—was short and shapely, while Ozara was tall and thin. Varda was halfway in-between, neither short nor tall, neither shapely nor thin. And she didn’t look like her mother; instead, she had the same dark brown hair and hazel eyes that belonged to her father.

Both her sisters wore some of the last dresses from home, gowns that had been brought at great expense from Earth to be worn once at some gala or fête, and then usually discarded the next earth-day, as if they were as common as dust or stars. Varda had altered them three months ago to fit the latest trends. The newest fashions involved stiff, cone-shaped skirts, with a variety of geometric designs; her sisters’ dresses were knee-length, one with a zigzag pattern, and the other with a triangle pattern, both in black and white. It almost hurt Varda’s eyes to look at the designs. She would have chosen a more subdued pattern or colors, but her sisters had never been subdued, and Varda smiled, suddenly happy they had come.

Several strings of moonglass beads were artfully arranged around Atara’s head and Ozara’s neck: the last things they had bought as tourists, and the least valuable.

“What is that stench?” Ozara wrinkled her nose and turned away.

“What have you done to your hair?” Atara wrinkled her brow and gestured at the soiled strands that fell down Varda’s back all the way to her waist.

“Tying your hair back when you work in food service is sensible,” Varda replied, and sighed. She had not seen them for months, not since she had altered those dresses for them. “Why are you here?”

“Father, of course,” they replied in perfect unison.

“He won’t tell me anything.” Varda shook her head as she opened the door and gestured for them to come inside, noticing at last the stares from other colonists who too had returned to their homes nearby. The twins never failed to attract attention, and Varda grinned again. “Let me make myself more presentable.”

Less than a quarter of an hour later, she was done, but Atara and Ozara both frowned at the sturdy, serviceable uniform of formfitting gray shirt and slacks she had changed into, the standard nanotech work clothes, which adjusted based on the temperature.

“I know we are not wealthy anymore, but do you have to look so plain?” Ozara said.

“You could at least do something with your hair,” added Atara.

Before Varda could respond, a chime sounded, and she rushed over to open the door.

Xenos stood there, eyes bleary and nearly blank. He looked exhausted, though not as bad as when he had come back from the ill-fated trip.

“Father!” the two cried in unison as they embraced him, one on each side, giving him a kiss on each cheek.

His mouth smiled, but his eyes did not.

“I am sorry, but all hope is lost. I know why you have come, but I do not have what you seek.”

They pulled away, their faces frozen, their eyes icy. Ozara spoke first.

“We can’t survive like this,” she said.

Atara nodded.

“Father provides for us,” Varda broke in, seeing the downcast look on her father’s face. “We have the basic necessities here.”

“Necessities!” Atara mocked. “That is all it is. Just enough food and water to survive. Limited energy access. Quarters hardly big enough for a mouse. The only reason we were even able to make it here was because someone gave us the tickets for the maglev, when they had to stay behind for some reason.” She sniffed loudly, and then gestured at the four bunks on the wall. “Varda, you can’t really be happy just … surviving.”

“I don’t want to survive. I want to live!” Ozara’s face was flushed now, and she banged her fist against the wall. “You can’t live on this!”

“We can.” Varda held out her hands in a pleading gesture. “I work. Father works. You can work.”

Ozara laughed, loudly and derisively. “What, for a few silvers, like you?” Shaking her head, Ozara continued. “I’m a jewelry designer, and Atara is a hair and makeup designer. Few will hire us for that.”

“We have tried,” admitted Atara. “No one will pay us full wages, or even half wages.”

Varda pulled her hands back. “As soon as father’s debt is paid off—”

“That could take years!” Ozara shouted.

“Eight months,” said Xenos, breaking in. His daughters all turned to him and stared. Varda shivered. “I’ve gotten some work with several helium-3 groups. I leave on the twentieth of this month. You know my skills are much in demand in mining. I’ll spend four weeks on and one week off. It has all been arranged. Once my debt is gone, I’ll keep working. A year more after that will be enough to buy passage home for you three if you wish, plus all the things you asked for, everything you could desire. You’ll have more choices then. If I can secure a job back at home, I’ll join you. Or I’ll stay up here for a few more years. It is good pay, excellent pay, enough for several lifetimes if I work long enough. I’ll make sure to give you everything you want. We may never be as rich as we were before, but it will be better, I promise.” Speech finished, Xenos turned away and leaned against the wall, shoulders bent.

Shock and fear filling her face, Varda gripped his arm. She could tell his mind was made up. He would never tell her what had really happened. “You can’t do this!” she cried. “That’s too much time out there! It’s dangerous! You’ll die!”

He turned back, and smiled his first real smile. “We all have to die sometime. Besides, I’m only fifty-four, and in good health. I still have many more years to live. It won’t be as bad as you think.”

“If only you hadn’t been so foolish,” Atara cried, tears running down her face. “Putting up everything we had as collateral! No insurance!”

“Not many were willing to insure such a large shipment.”

“Then you should have gone for a smaller one!”

“I know, Atara, I know! You cannot make me feel any worse than I already do, cannot say anything I haven’t told myself hundreds of times.” He sighed, his face filled with guilt and frustration, and he brushed his hair back from his brow. “This was my fault, caused by my own foolishness, my own stupidity, my own greed. So I will pay the price.”

“Father!” Varda’s voice was desperate. “It was not your fault!”

Ozara broke in. “Honestly, Varda, I think they exaggerate the health problems. They don’t want just anybody for such high-paying jobs.”

Atara nodded vigorously. “The only people I’ve heard of dying passed away years later, of things that couldn’t possibly be related. Besides, I’m not the one who thought rose seeds could survive after all this time on a crashed ship!” She laughed, a smug look on her face, and the sound of the laugh seemed to echo in the small space.

Looking away, Varda gritted her teeth. Seeds could survive very harsh conditions, not that her sisters would believe it.

“You never want practical things, like us. Precious metals and precious jewels … you can do something with those!” Ozara added.

Varda trembled as Atara and Ozara embraced their father, their tears forgotten. She was angry, very angry, but she found she could not hate her sisters, either for not wanting to work, or for their acceptance of his decision. Father had given them everything they desired as children, and somehow managed to give them even more after their mother’s death—perhaps out of misplaced guilt—and thus they found it hard to work or to live a life without luxury. And they lived in the present, lived for the present, and the future was abstract and unreal to them, for it didn’t exist yet. But the future would come, Varda knew, and her father would be dead before his time, as dead as the rose, its petals now drained of color and of life.

And she could not—she would not—let it happen.

Chapter 4

Eight earth-days passed, but to Varda, the time felt like weeks. Her father spent the time ruthlessly exercising, preparing his body as best he could for the month of lunar gravity ahead. Her sisters spent the time planning what they would buy once their father had paid off his debt. Varda spent the time waiting, waiting while she worked once more in the food service department, waiting while she updated two more dresses for her sisters to wear, waiting until she was alone, her sisters gone back to Medii Base, her father gone back to mining.

When her father had first come back with the secret of the golden rose, Varda had hoped he would talk to her on his own. But now she knew he would take the secret to his grave. If there was any chance to save him, she would take it. He had erased all trace of the flight from the Eagle's computer—only an expert would be able to find it—but he did not know about the cache cube. Four months previously after a disastrous data loss she had traded an embroidered scarf to one of their neighbors for the used storage cube. Not wanting such a thing to happen again, Varda had programmed the device to automatically copy all data uploaded to any of their computers, which included the lunar flyer. She had not even thought to tell her father of its existence, and now she was glad she had forgotten.

Packing took little time. All she brought were the necessities for survival, and the dead golden rose, wrapped now in a white handkerchief that she had embroidered the previous earth-week in golden thread in a rose design. It was the last of her supply of the metallic thread. She hoped it could serve as a peace offering of sorts.

Varda used all that was left of her meager earnings to pay for the fuel, just enough to get her there and back, as well as the required emergency supply. As the workers prepared the flyer for liftoff, and as a robot helped her into her suit, she stared at the stylized eagle on the starboard side of the command module, a remnant of better days, the design now faded, but no less majestic, the worn, gold-coated foil on its surface giving it gravitas and even a kind of grace, like the man who had restored it: her father. Tears threatened to fall down her cheeks, and she bent her head, blinking, for she could not wipe them away, not with her helmet already on, and she didn't want take it off and reveal her pain to anyone else. Desperately, she tried to think of what she was about to do.

The flight-path coordinates revealed that her father had gone to White Crater, over fourteen miles wide, found on the southern hemisphere on the far side of the moon. The flyer had landed near a smaller crater at its edge. She didn't like flying in these conditions, at least not when it was still lunar night on the path she would go, but she had little choice. She couldn't chance her father finding out somehow. And so she breathed a sigh of relief when space traffic control gave her permission to leave.

After driving the flyer out of the hangar, Varda fired up the vertical lift thrusters. There were four of them at each of the bottom four corners of the craft, the first two just behind the command module in the forward thruster assembly, the last two just in front of the main engines in the aft thruster assembly. The computer's guidance, navigation, and control system engaged, and the thrusters began to lift the craft off the Moon's surface, and retracted the landing gear.

When the flyer was high enough off the ground, the smaller maneuvering thrusters—the reaction control system—began to fire. Of these, there were four thruster groups, also at the four corners of the craft, but to the sides and top and bottom: each group had four primary thrusters—and four secondary thrusters—pointed outward in four different directions. These angled the nose of the command module to a forty degree angle. Only then did the four main thrusters of the engine at the back of the spacecraft fire, propelling the flyer in a high arc skyward—if a celestial body without an atmosphere can be said to have a sky—and the rocket ship flew off toward the horizon.

Passing from lunar day to lunar night was quick, due to the lack of atmosphere. The sky was always black on the Moon, so you could only tell the difference by the bright reflection of the Sun on its surface during the lunar day, and the bright stars in the sky during the lunar night. She looked back then for one last glimpse as the Earth too disappeared from sight. It was the first day of summer on Earth, but to Varda it seemed like the first day of winter. It was so dark out, the Moon's surface almost hidden in the shadows below her. Varda concentrated on the primary flight display and the systems information display. Autopilot was engaged, but Varda was still the pilot, and she knew she had to pay attention to what was going on and where they were, just in case anything did go wrong.

As the ship flew she wondered what it was like for the ancient sea captains of old, using compasses and sextants to guide the way during the

dark of night. Compasses would not work on the Moon, which lacked a dipolar magnetic field, though sextants—guided by the stars—would. Otherwise, it had to be much the same, a vast, unending sea above and below, except only the sea of stars above would stay the same, for there was no sea of water on the Moon, only a sea of craters and plains. The other side of the moon—the side on which she lived, the side facing Earth—had more of the plains, which were called maria, meaning "seas," called so by astronomers in ancient times who had believed the flat areas to be bodies of water, which was ironic since they were just dust, and the only water was in polar craters. Other features were also named after bodies of water, like the largest base, Medii Base, or Central Base, named for its location, Sinus Medii, which meant "bay of the center."

Eight earth-hours passed, but to Varda, the time felt like minutes. The reaction control system engaged once more, the main engines turned off just after the maneuvering thrusters turned on, rotating the nose of the flyer back toward the Moon. The descent to the Moon's surface took forty minutes, and soon Varda saw the crater's surface reflected by the lights of the spacecraft as the landing gear extended and the lift thrusters engaged, slowing and controlling the descent of the craft. The landing was not as rough as she anticipated, and soon the thrusters were silent. Varda set the craft to power save mode, and after a quick visit to the wash station—and a quick glance in the mirror at her ashen face, as gray as moon dust—she suited back up with the help of the robotic arms, made sure she had a flashlight, and departed through the airlock.

She stood for a while in the small pool of light cast by the lunar flyer, mentally preparing herself for disaster. At last she turned on the flashlight, and scanned her surroundings. There were clear marks on the ground from her father's last visit, and soon she saw a glimmer of metal reflected in the light.

Three hundred yards away she saw one of the cargo containers almost covered in moon dust. Her heart leapt when she saw that it appeared to be largely intact, though the couplings connecting it to the other containers at either end had been severed from the force of the crash. She nearly ran toward it before she remembered that she was still in lunar gravity, and so she set out swiftly but carefully toward it, making sure she didn't lose her footing.

It was in surprisingly good condition, she saw once she was closer, and she released the breath she only now realized she had been holding. Only minor repairs would be needed, and then she could land the lunar flyer on top of it—two cargo containers could fit in under the superstructure connecting the fore and aft thruster assemblies once it was fully extended—engage the payload clamps, and fly away. She had never done it before and she hoped she could do it right. She would have to trust the computer would make no errors. Pulling out an equipment scanner from an outer pocket of her suit with trembling hands, she circled the container slowly, uploading the information to her flyer's computer.

After clearing away some of the dust with her gloved hand, Varda pulled away the access panel on the side and discovered that the environmental controls—used to keep the more fragile items at a more constant temperature—were fully charged. Had her father charged the batteries? She scanned the cargo manifest, and made a quick note of what was onboard. Even just this container's supplies would be more than enough to pay off her father's debt. Joy burst within her heart like a supernova, like a star's last burst, only instead of an end, it felt like a beginning.

Cheered now, she moved onward, her steps filled with purpose and happiness. Four hundred more yards downhill was a group of three that were still connected, the couplings between them intact. They too were in decent condition, but required more extensive repairs, with fully charged batteries as well. She scanned them too.

Activating the binocular viewscreen in her helmet, she raised her flashlight and switched on the high intensity beam. Yes, there they were. She zoomed in. She counted twelve more that seemed to be intact, arrayed in a broken, ragged line down the crater's inner surface over a mile long. She set the magnification higher. The ones farthest away—four of them, though she wasn't certain—were probably unsalvageable, their pieces strewn across the lunar regolith in a mass of twisted metal. The empty command module at the beginning of the long line of cargo containers also seemed to be in bad shape. She knew then what had probably happened: the ship had crashed nose first, destroying the first containers and many of the couplings, but as it had crashed at just the right angle, the rest of the containers had been relatively undamaged as they slid down the inner wall of the crater. She frowned then, puzzled, her joy subsiding. Where was the engine, the propulsion unit at the back of the cargo train? For that matter,

four cargo containers were missing. But perhaps she missed them somehow. Frowning now, Varda did a full scan of the horizon, going from low magnification to the highest setting, walking around the lunar flyer. They were gone.

It was only then that she noticed the tracks leading up the side of the crater. It was only then that out of the darkness appeared a shining glow. Far ahead of her she saw a light, brighter than a star, unblinking and unbearable.

Chapter 5

Back in the flyer, Varda could only stare at the light before her. Someone was there, and she was sure they knew that she had come. Undoubtedly the sensors that all the bases used had revealed her presence. Even though she sensed where the transponder signal had to be, she inputted the request to the computer, and the viewscreen showed the signal was at the source of the light. It was weak, but it was there. And where the missing engine was, the missing four containers would probably be as well.

Still, the missing containers were just four. She could ignore the light and take at least two of the rest back. There was no one to stop her. Pulling up the scans she had done earlier, she had the computer calculate methods of repair, as well as the time it would take, and if she had the right supplies. Then, and only then, she realized that she had not even thought to check on that before she left. Her father would have thought of it. A word she rarely said burst from her lips, and she was too upset at herself to regret it.

The first way the computer told her had the best results, but could only be done inside a base that had air and regulated temperatures, and where you did not need to wear the heavy gloves required on the surface. The second way was done mostly in emergencies out in space or on the Moon, good enough to get the cargo containers “shipshape,” as it were. It was also something she could do on her own; indeed, most anyone could do it. Nervously she checked the storage area at the back of the command module, unlocking and opening the metal cabinets that lined the walls. A bin inside one labeled “silicone rubber adhesives” held what she needed. More cabinets revealed even more similarly labeled bins. Nervously, she counted what was there, before inputting the amount to the computers. She was relieved at the results: she did have enough to fix at least a few containers, and since she could only take two at a time anyway, she could always return with more supplies. It would take her a few days work, and she would probably be sick at the end of it, but it would be worth it.

Still, it would take a few days. And that light … whoever was there knew that she had come. She thought of the fear her father had clearly felt. Would someone out there grow angry at her as well? She shook her head, and nearly said the word again. What she had to do was obvious. Going inside the base was her only real choice.

She didn’t bother attempting flight so close to the source, and so she drove the vehicle forward on the landing wheels. Twelve hundred yards away she saw the tunnel. It was cleverly hidden, made to blend in with the environment, looking like a normal depression in the surface of the crater, and she probably wouldn’t have seen it if it hadn’t been for the light that still shone ahead of her.

She drove down into the tunnel. The first light switched off, and then more lights replaced it, two lines on either side of her vehicle. She followed them to a large spacecraft hangar door that slid upward as she watched. Two much smaller doors, meant for lunar rovers—or people in spacesuits—sat to either side. Lights turned on inside the next chamber, and once again, those behind her switched off. There were also outlets for emergency power and oxygen on the walls of the tunnel near the door. It was no surprise to her: the other bases on the Moon had similar configurations.

The next chamber, as she expected, was the airlock. She didn’t have long to wait, perhaps twelve minutes, before air automatically filled the space, and the next door opened to the decontamination chamber. Robotic arms extended from the walls and vacuumed much of the moon dust away from the flyer. Once that was finished, the arms retracted and the door to the hangar opened ahead of her.

The hangar bay was circular, with a domed ceiling. High above her head were six large square-shaped lights, arranged in a star pattern, joined by spokes. On her left and right were two tunnels with bays for dozens of vehicles, either rovers or flyers. But most importantly, she saw the four containers and the main engine, the source of the transponder signal. The containers were intact, ready for the lunar flyer to pick up and haul away. Turning the craft around, Varda saw that the door to the hangar was already closed behind her. It didn’t matter anyway. She needed to meet the one who lived here, the one from whom her father stole. After all, she had known that there must be someone—or several someones—there, someone hidden from the world, someone who did not want anyone to know where they were, and she knew that she must face them.

It was time. Varda removed the spacesuit once again, placed the wrapped rose in a bag which she slung on her back, and then carefully walked down the extendible ladder, for she could feel the effects of earth-normal gravity—this base had the same artificial gravity generators as

those in Peary—and the change always made her feel briefly like she was in someone else's body … or like she was suspended in space, alone … or like her body had died, and her mind was still living. For the first time since she set out, Varda could feel the fear, hidden deep in her heart. The strangeness passed, and Varda felt normal again, or close to normal.

Now out of the flyer, Varda could see details she had not seen before from the spacecraft's front window. Fascinated, she walked closer. The wall was made out of gray lunar dirt and dust, as she had expected, but the one who had been in charge of the three-dimensional printing of it was clearly an artist, and had planned it so it looked like natural stones laid one upon the other with mortar between. There was no detectible repeat in pattern, either. The lights on the wall were elegant: sconces of burnished gold with ornate detailing. The stonework on the domed ceiling reminded her of the castles and cathedrals of ancient Earth. And the lights on the ceiling were even more elegant: immense chandeliers, also of burnished gold. Looking back down she saw the floor was equally lovely, with some sort of geometric mosaic pattern on its surface. Who was rich enough to decorate a simple hangar so beautifully?

There was a small sound. Varda turned uneasily toward it. Just like before a door had opened up before her. Double doors made of carved wood, with the same gold hardware. Stepping forward, she ran a hand over the carvings. It was one of the most lovely things she had ever seen, its geometric design similar to the floor, and she thought she saw a leaf and vine motif.

Beyond the doors stood the interior of the largest dome she had ever seen. It had to be eight hundred yards in diameter. To either side of the door a wall rose straight up, perhaps twelve yards high. Like the walls of the hangar, it too was made to resemble a stone and mortar wall. But the very high domed ceiling was different from that of the hangar, with sky simulation technology much more advanced than at Peary Base—which hadn't had a major overhaul in decades—and she was almost convinced that she was back on Earth, walking under a bright and cloudy sky. The triangles of the geodesic dome's roof were well hidden, and she could not see the seams. At Peary Base she could, for many of the panels had been replaced over the last century, and no longer quite matched.

And then there was the flora. Ivy crawled up the wall. At the wall's base were small, low shrubs, all in a row, flanking each side of a wide path that

appeared to circle the habitat. Lush, tall trees also loomed ahead of Varda, so many of them, also encircling the habitat. Everything was slightly overgrown, slightly neglected, and Varda found it charming and rustic. If she wasn't so nervous, she would be smiling.

A small personal transport vehicle stood in front of her, like it was waiting for her. The rectangular vehicle had an open top and an elegant design of curls and swirls in silver and gold on gleaming white panels on its sides. And ordinary straight wheels, just like on Earth. She had not seen such a thing in over a year.

All of the wheels on the Moon—and many on the Earth—were sinusoidal, with single or multiple—generally three—wavy treads that lay side by side. It sounded like a fantasy until you saw them in motion. They were perfect for riding on lunar terrain, as they combined the advantages of both narrow and wide wheels.

But Varda still liked the old-fashioned circular wheels, and was pleased to see them, though she understood why they weren't on the Moon, for many things on the Moon were made with standardized, interchangeable parts for practical reasons. Still, it often made things look utilitarian and unimaginative.

So far, there were few things that were utilitarian or unimaginative at this base.

Varda hesitated only a moment before boarding the vehicle and turning it on.

She decided to follow the perimeter first. Every so often there were double doors in the wall—identical to the hangar doors—that led to other, smaller domes about three hundred yards in diameter, a size she was used to. The first was hydroponics, with stacked rows of plants rising high above her head, stretching all the way to the opposite side. It was not as full as she had expected, and perhaps only one-fourth of the tiers were in use. It had the modern look she was used to, with a translucent white ceiling composed of grow lights. The next was a power station and the air filtration, creation, and recirculation station. After that an aquaponics bay, which had all the equipment it needed, but was also not in use. Then there was a second hangar, identical to the first, on the opposite side. Circling around she discovered a hydroponics bay with no plants, a water storage and reclamation station, and last an aquaponics bay that was in use, though

like the first hydroponics bay, it couldn’t have been operating at more than one quarter of its capacity.

It was only now that Varda turned down the path that led to the center, one of two that bisected the dome. As she went she noticed other, more curving paths: some circles within circles, some circles overlapping circles. It was beautifully designed. More tall trees, a great variety of them, lined the main path down the center, their branches overlapping overhead. She could also see a few large open patches of short grass, as well as carved wooden and wrought iron benches, and sometimes a small gazebo, with ivy climbing high.

At the center, surrounded by a circular path that was over two hundred yards wide, was a great castle, also of stone like the wall. A castle: that was the only way for Varda to describe it. But what really caught her attention were the roses, for a rose garden surrounded it.

Abandoning the vehicle, Varda ran forward, gasping in joy, her heart beating fast. In the middle, in a semicircular area on either side of the path, were black roses as dark as ebony, white roses as warm as ivory, and gray roses as soft as silver. On either side were pink and green roses of every shade imaginable, from the softest blush to the brightest rouge, from the palest lime to the darkest olive. And other shades besides, jewel tones: rose quartz, pink sapphire, peridot, emerald. Reaching out, she touched them reverently and respectfully, caressing the petals.

Walking around the side of the mansion, she discovered—as she suspected—the same symmetrical garden. It was only then she realized there were no gold roses. And then she noticed something else: it was getting dim. Looking up, she saw the sky simulator was turning from day to night.

She could delay no longer, and so she walked back around to what she assumed was the main entrance. The mansion, which stretched from one side of the inner circular path to the other, was in three parts. Two identical wings were at either side, with doors at either end. The central portion of the house was roughly square. There was a very tall first story, with two more stories on top. The place had to be nearly sixty feet high. Long balconies made of wrought iron and wood and glass extended the entire length of all of the floors, giving access to the rooms via glass doors that had been made to match the windows. It was a pleasing combination of the modern and the ancient.

Varda saw there was a stone arch over the top of the tall main wooden double doors, which had the same geometric and nature patterns as all the other doors. On it was written in very large letters these words: *Gaudete cum laetitia, qui in tristitia fuistis*. She wasn't entirely sure what it all meant, but she thought it spoke of rejoicing, if she remembered her course in ancient languages correctly. Perhaps she should have paid more attention in that class.

As she stared at the door, lights turned on to either side, and in the windows beside them as well. The wings of the castle remained dark. Uneasy, she turned around for one last glance behind her. Rosy sunset had turned to smoky twilight.

A personal server robot waited for her just inside the doors. Light gleamed off its polished white surface. It led her over to a computer station, on top of a lovely hardwood desk, also carved. She wondered why she was there, and looked toward the robot, but it was silent, and then she noticed the bioscanner. She pressed her hand to it, the computer registered her presence, and its screen came to life.

Varda sat as the computer completed the biometric and genetic scan, inputting it into the mansion's system. She had done so when she had first arrived on the Moon. A biometric and genetic scan—most often of the palm—confirmed identity, could not be faked, and could only be done on living tissue.

"Greetings, mistress," came a voice. Varda jumped and turned toward it. It was the robot, and she breathed a sigh of relief. It bowed at her, if the swaying motion of its torso was what she thought it was. It wasn't quite human-shaped after all, and thus harder to read.

Staring, Varda asked, "Why did you call me that?"

"Because you are," was the unhelpful response.

Varda turned toward the computer, and a few taps of her fingers later, found she could access it. She stared at the computer, reading the information on the screen. That couldn't be right. It made no sense.

According to the information displayed, the entire base was at her command; the owner had ceded control to her. For lack of a better word, she was now the mistress of this establishment. It was hard to fathom, and then she remembered how frightened her father had been, how reluctant to talk about this place. Was this person or persons trying to put her at ease, tell her that they meant her no harm? She realized then that she could

leave and no one could stop her; she could come back as often as she wanted, repair the containers in the hangar, and take them with her. It was a gift of trust, undeniable and unmistakable. She took the rose out now, clutching it much like her father had held it all those weeks before.

“I would like to meet your master now,” Varda asked the robot, who turned and led her from the entrance hall to a common room—both decorated with lots of wood and gold—and then to a door, smaller, but just as ornate as all the rest she had seen.

Going through, she found herself in an inner, fully enclosed courtyard of stone, square-shaped, and more than one hundred feet wide. There were gold sconces like those she had seen before lighting the perimeter, and ivy and trees and shrubs. And there, at last, were the gold roses, planted in a circle around a central fountain.

And sitting on the edge of the fountain, facing away from her, was a man, judging by his height and the breadth of his shoulders.

Her heart beating fast with fear, Varda walked forward, the rose now held in front of her, wrapped in the embroidered cloth, as if it was an offering or sacrifice, or as if she was an offering or sacrifice. The thought chilled her.

“I have come about the rose my father stole,” she said, in a voice so soft she worried he had not heard her.

“Yes.” His voice was quiet and low, deep and rough, and not exactly … human.

“I have come to return it, and to make amends,” Varda said. She was shivering now, and she tried, unsuccessfully, to keep her body still.

“Yes.” A pause. “Thank you. My roses are of great worth to me.” Another pause. “I did not expect that you would come. I did not expect that your father would tell you.”

“He did not.”

A third pause, that lasted so long the sky simulator changed to stars. “You came of your own free will?” It was hard to judge his voice, but she thought she detected incredulity, and some more complex emotion that she could not name.

“Yes,” Varda replied.

“You have great integrity. I did not think to see it in another.”

She had idea what she could say to that, and so she said nothing.

“You know you may go now,” he continued. “You know I cannot stop you.”

“Yes.” Now it was her turn to pause. “Will you not let me see you?”

He sighed, stood, stepped forward, and turned toward the light. Varda nearly screamed.

Chapter 6

He was large, just four inches shy of seven feet, with wide shoulders, and a heavily muscled, strangely-proportioned body. But that did not fill her with horror.

He had the face and body of a beast … and a man. Demonic angel and angelic demon, combined in one being.

Short, pale brown-gold fur covered the unnatural angles of his face and neck. His hair had no one color, and was a mixture, with all shades of brown, with black and white and every gray between. It didn't even look like hair; but like spiky feathers on the grotesquely large, awkward head. His nose was huge and curved, with wide nostrils. His deep-set eyes, which seemed to glare from under heavy, down-turned brows, had black pupils, gold irises, and, strangest of all, were surrounded by black where white should have been. The same brown-gold fur covered what she could see of his arms and hands, but was longer. The thick, stubby fingers ended in claws, in talons. He was both a bird and a beast of prey, eagle and lion combined, but somehow still human.

"How?" she asked, gasping, realizing only then that she had dropped the rose.

He turned away, flinched away, and bowed his head.

"Against my will, I was genetically modified," he replied, in his rugged, ragged voice. "Someone wished to force me to do that which I could never do."

"Why? Who? What?"

"That is something of which I cannot speak. The lives of others rely on my silence."

"No one can help you?"

"Only the one who cursed me has the power."

"Surely someone can help you!"

He sighed, shaking his head in sadness and frustration. "Even if I dared reveal that I still lived, you know genetic manipulation of this kind, mixing man and beast, is forbidden."

"Can you at least tell me your name?" Forcing her fear back into the depths of her heart and mind, hiding it beneath faith, the only thing strong enough to conquer fear, she picked up the dropped rose.

He turned back toward her, and she forced herself to look at him. Closer, she could see that he was more human than she had first thought, for the shadows, like all darkness, had hidden much. She decided that his eyes were the worst, the eyes of an otherworldly being. Her first thought of angel was wrong; this man was a demon.

He put out a hand as if to touch her, but she shrank back, only just managing not to run. He pulled the offending hand back, resting it on his heart.

“My name is Griff,” he said, and bowed, a strange gesture, as if he were a knight of old.

It was the strange name, and the wealth she saw all around her—so few were that wealthy—that told her who he was.

“You’re the last son of the Gold family! The one believed dead when the Fenix exploded out in space!” she blurted out. Surprise had at last overcome the fear, at least for a moment.

He nodded.

“They used to say your family was cursed.”

Griff smiled, grimly. She shuddered at the sight.

“Yes,” he said, nodding. She shuddered again.

Varda knew the story. Everyone knew the story. A man who could take burnt ashes and rekindle them into a blazing fire: that was Orion “Son of Fire” Gold. He had been nothing, but had become the richest man in the solar system in just three years.

He had married a lovely woman named Astra Wind, and together the two had three sons: Linus, Rufus, and Griff. Life seemed perfect for the Gold family, for they were good and giving. Many said they had been blessed by God. But soon those same people said they were cursed.

The first son died in an accident with his young wife. The second son died of an illness, a month before he himself was to wed. Over the years more and more deaths joined them. Many of those were of people close to the family. They died in a variety of accidents. They died of a variety of illnesses. And no one knew why. All they knew was that if someone got close to the family, they died not long after. Once sought-after, the Golds were now shunned. Only a few brave souls escaped the curse.

The final blow had come two years ago with the apparent death of mother, father, and the youngest son in a spacecraft accident. There was only one badly-burned body to bury, that of the father, the only trace of

mother and son the copious blood coating the floor and walls. They were believed to have burned up in the atmosphere when the wreckage of the ship plunged down to Earth.

Orion, a man who could take burnt ashes and rekindle them into a blazing fire, died in fire himself. The irony of it colored news stories for months.

As Varda wondered what she could say to him about his dead family, she remembered something else.

“What happened to my father here? And what did you tell him?”

Griff sighed. “When the cargo ship first crashed here, I knew there was the possibility that someone would find me. I thought of destroying what was left, but it was dishonorable, so instead I made sure the power levels on each container were at full capacity, charging them periodically. Months passed and no one came. And then someone did. Still, it seemed unlikely he would find me, despite being so close, but I watched him closely, secretly. As he worked on the ship there was an accident; your father’s oxygen was compromised, and he collapsed. I knew I could not leave him to die on the cold surface of the Moon, so I brought him inside. When he regained consciousness he must have felt he had woken up in a dream. He spoke to me—to the unknown master of the house, that is what he called me—as if I was some angel who had rescued him from hell.

“I decided it was only for the good that he thought I was an angel. If he told such a tale to others, they would think he was only imagining this place, and tell him it was just a result of the hypoxia. So I fed him and sheltered him, and communicated with him when necessary through the robot you just met. I had also brought the engine and the four cargo containers inside the hangar, so that he could work on them in comfort. But I had not anticipated just how curious he would be, that he would find my precious gold roses. If he had taken anything else, I would have said nothing. What use are gold and gems to me? But when he plucked the rose I felt as if my heart had been plucked instead. They are a living reminder of my mother.”

“Surely that can’t be the only reason,” Varda said. “There are dozens of rose plants here, with hundreds of blooms. Roses die everyday. Why was the rose so valuable?”

“My mother genetically engineered them. It was a hobby of hers. Few knew about it. Indeed, only one other living soul knows of the existence of

gold roses. And that one is the one who did this to me. I was worried if someone saw such a rare thing, word would get back to her, and then she would find me. And she *would* find me." Griff was silent for a few moments before he continued. "In my anger, I confronted your father, and for the first time he saw me face to face, and I told him I had given him sustenance and shelter, and he had repaid me by stealing. He pleaded, fear in his eyes, and when he spoke of you, and of your love for roses, I knew why he had done it, and a part of me understood him. So I told your father to bring you the rose, but to tell no one else. I told him if he wanted to take his treasure with him, he would have to send one he treasured to retrieve it."

"Me." The word was little more than a whisper.

"Yes, for why else would he have stolen the rose, except for one he treasured? I also told him that the one he sent would take no harm from me. I should not be surprised that he did not believe it. I do not think I would have, were I in his place."

Varda looked at her hands. She was gripping the rose so hard her skin would have been pierced by a thorn, were it not that it was wrapped in cloth. "Is that why you made me mistress here?" she asked.

He inclined his head in assent.

"I still feel like I should make amends for the rose." Varda held out the rose and the embroidered cloth. She only just managed not to shake in fear when he took her offering; she was glad that he was careful not to touch her.

He seemed to ignore the rose, concentrating on the embroidery, running his finger reverently over the gold threads. "It is beautifully made. My mother was also talented in the textile arts." His voice was somber and sad, laden heavy with memories.

For the first time, she saw what he was wearing: roughly-made black clothes and cloak. His hairy, clawed feet were unshod. He turned away from her, gesturing at the roses.

"Many moments and memories, much time and talent are found in each rose in this garden. If you wish to repay, give of your moments and memories, give of your time and talent," he continued. "Such things cost nothing and yet cost everything."

Griff was quiet for a while, contemplating the rose, as if his future was hidden in its depths, as if it was a sign of what was to come.

“It will take time to repair and ready the containers for transport. I will help you. In return, I would be honored by your moments and memories, your time and talent. It has been so long since I have truly had someone to talk to. I will give you anything you could need or want. All that I have is yours. But it is late”—he gestured toward the sky simulator, which had long since turned dark—“and you must be tired and thirsty. The server robot will take you to your quarters.”

In a few moments he was gone, and the robot was there instead. In silence, she followed it to the top floor, to a large suite of rooms, which she locked, for she was still afraid of the man who was also a beast. After a lovely repast of a variety of cheeses and fruits—she had not eaten such luxuries for months—she walked over to a window. It was dark, with no lamps lit along the paths. Extinguishing the lights inside as well, she sat for a moment on the bed in complete darkness. Before she could stop it great sobs escaped, and then she did not want to stop the outpouring of shock, of pain, of grief, and of fear, and countless other emotions besides.

At last, spent, she curled up, clutching her legs to her chest, and that night she dreamed of an endless garden of golden roses under a dark lunar sky.

Chapter 7

The light—streaming through the window, as soft as a candle's glow—woke Varda, and when she walked to the window, she saw the pale rose pink of dawn on the sky simulator. Each rose in the garden gleamed like a precious gem. Soon the sky on the horizon would turn gold, as the sun came to life, reborn each morning anew. She smiled at her fanciful thoughts, for the sky she saw was not real, only a picture—many pictures, one after the other—of the true thing, taken from Earth.

Last night she had been too tired to explore her rooms—rooms, not quarters. Everything she could desire in a home was here, and more, but what she really loved were things that reminded her of Earth: the spacious tub—she spent a quarter of an hour just soaking in it—and the library—filled with thousands of books bound in cloth or leather and decorated in gold or silver—and the art room—with a seemingly endless supply of paper, pens, watercolors, and paints. Still, all of these were as nothing compared to the sewing room, which had carved wooden cabinets filled with bolts of fabric in canvas and cotton, in linens and lace, in silks and satin, and more. Three fabric printers stood against one wall, connected to a sophisticated design computer. Everything for sewing, knitting, quilting; everything for weaving, spinning, embroidering; everything for beadwork, needlework, goldwork—Varda paused, for this last she had never learned. She embroidered with gold thread, but it was really gold-colored thread, not the gold-coated silver—or just silver or copper, depending on the look you wanted—of goldwork, real metal threads sewn on the surface of the fabric using another thread, usually of invisible silk.

Everything around her was of the highest quality. Carved wood was everywhere, as were the walls of mortar and stone, and the gold fixtures. While many of the "gold" fixtures were probably brass, there were mirrors with gilt frames and books with gilt edging, and jewelry—in white and black marble boxes—composed entirely of what seemed to be 24-karat gold. Wooden boxes contained more jewelry in platinum or 18-karat gold, set with a variety of precious and semi-precious stones. In a drawer of the vanity table she found perhaps thousands of loose stones, both in cabochon and a variety of faceted cuts, and she ran them through her fingers, listening to them clink and clank against each other.

A second drawer revealed more stones, all cabochons. They looked different somehow, and when she looked closer Varda realized they were not regular stones, but were rare star stones. Picking up a green star sapphire, she studied the six-rayed star within, the result of asterism, an optical phenomenon. A separate compartment held just star moonstones, which differed from the other star stones, as four-rayed stars were revealed in the light, instead of the usual six. Yet another compartment held only rose quartz stones, but they seemed to be without stars. Varda frowned for a while as she studied one of them, and then laughed when she remembered there were two types of asterism, the first—and most common—revealed in reflected light, like the moonstones, and the second revealed in transmitted light, like the rose quartz. When she held the stone in front of a nearby lamp, she at last could see the bright six-rayed star within. Carefully she replaced the stone and closed the drawer, still smiling.

The main colors used in the fabrics that decorated the mansion seemed to be greens of all shades, set against a neutral background. That, and the plants interspersed around most of the rooms, made her feel like she was really in a garden. There were velvet curtains framing the windows and the bed, cotton upholstery on the benches and chairs, and a silk bedspread. Much of the fabric was hand-embroidered, patterned, or both.

While the same geometric and floral motifs dominated the decor, there was a great variety of other patterns as well. Herringbone and houndstooth, stripes and spirals, lattice and trellis, and much, much more—her mind could hardly comprehend the great variety. Set in such a simple color palette, she wasn’t overwhelmed. Each hand-knotted rug on the floor was different, but in similar, related patterns and colors, lots of rich earth tones. A rose motif was common as well, though it remained unobtrusive next to the other patterns. All of it conveyed a sense of warmth and welcome.

A ringing sound at the front door of the suite caught her attention. Having already dressed—one of the room server robots had cleaned and pressed her plain gray travel outfit, making disapproving clicking noises when she chose it instead of the silk gown it had set out, one of many in the overflowing walk-in closet—she went to answer. The same robot from last night was there—it must be the majordomo of the house—and with it were dozens more, carrying vase after vase of roses. Bemused, Varda

watched as they filed in, placing the vases around the vast apartment. The last vase contained a single gold rose, which the robot set on the low table at the foot of her bed. Soon scent filled the air and the room smelled like summer.

“Greetings, mistress,” said the chief robot. “Please follow me to the gardens for your morning meal.”

Varda followed the robot through a maze of rooms similar to her own, down the stairs this time—instead of the elevator—and out the front door. The sun shimmered before her as she came at last to a quaint gazebo where a breakfast had been laid out on a circular table. A plush round rug in shades of green softened the hard floor, and a lacy pink and gold tablecloth warmed the wood table beneath. And the food! Varda ached inside at the sight, her hunger was so fierce. Apple juice and orange juice and milk in moonglass tumblers, pears and grapefruit in crystal bowls, boiled eggs and baked potatoes on silver trays. And bacon—real, undried bacon—on its own tray. She quickly loaded a ceramic plate—ignoring the offer of aid from the server robots that now surrounded her. She didn’t think she had ever enjoyed a meal more.

Fuller than she had been in months, Varda sat back for a while and contemplated what she should do. There was no sign of the beast—it was hard for her to think of him as Griff, for some reason she could not fathom. She wondered where he was, what he did during each day. As the lone human—or beast or manbeast—who lived here, Griff would be incredibly busy keeping the base running. The slightly neglected gardens appeared to attest to that, but he could merely be lazy, though he didn’t seem like that type of person, and she discarded the thought. He had the look of one who knew hard work, and his well-muscled physique—he must have been close to three hundred pounds—spoke of much physical exertion and much time spent on difficult tasks.

She decided to explore the mansion first. She had the time, not to mention the curiosity. The wings on either side seemed to be filled with what she guessed were guest or colonist or servants’ quarters on the two upper levels. Over four hundred people could live in them and not be crowded. The rooms were surprisingly spacious and well-appointed, the nicest servants’ quarters she had ever seen, just as well-decorated as the rest of the house. The only things they seemed to lack were personal effects of any kind, with only the most basic of clothing in the wardrobes

in a large variety of sizes, and Varda had the feeling the quarters had not been used for many, many years, though the presence of cleaner robots meant they were spotless.

On the lower floor of the wings were common rooms intended for the occupants of the upper quarters: libraries, several media rooms, dining halls—with adjoining kitchens—and parlors.

The central portion of the home contained the family's private quarters, with its own libraries, media rooms, living rooms, a dining room, a kitchen, and parlors. In the center of it all was the courtyard, with columned porches and balconies surrounding each side, and floor-to-ceiling windows that let the light into the rooms of the house that ringed the center. The courtyard was empty, and she briefly walked inside if only to look once more at the gold roses, and for the first time she saw the bees, dancing from flower to flower. She also saw that this garden was better tended than the others.

Feeling nervous suddenly, she walked back to the main entrance, and the main computer. Accessing it, she found a detailed map of the base's layout, as well as a comprehensive inventory. There were a number of outlying domes for other essentials—recycling and waste disposal, heating and cooling—as well as an immense storage basement four levels high beneath the base, a stable for goats and chickens—the source of the milk and eggs—and rooms containing machinery and equipment in the spaces between the round domes. Artificial gravity was on the lowest level, as expected, and gravity plating surrounded the entire base, above and below.

"Where is your master?" Varda again asked the robot, who had followed her.

"My master left the base though the main hangar," it replied.

Taking the same personal transport vehicle as before, she went there and found the hangar empty. One more container had been brought in, and several small robots were polishing it, cleaning more of the moon dust—which seemed to stick to everything—off the surface. The lunar flyer gleamed for the first time in years as well, and she could see several places that had been repaired, minor things her father had not had the means to do. Two of the containers from before—the ones her father had repaired—were already loaded on the flyer, and she realized she could leave now if she wanted. But it was getting close to midday—at least according to the small data pad she had tucked into her pocket,

conveniently set on the table in the main hall for her—and she didn't want to arrive at Medii Base so late, after what would be a full day's journey. And, of course, she knew she should give herself at least a day in earth-normal gravity.

She also felt she couldn't leave until she saw the beast, and thanked him properly for all he had done, and was doing. She didn't want to see him again—there was a part of her, the fearful, ignoble part, the part of her that she hated, that didn't want to see him *ever* again, if she was being honest—but the promise she had made to him meant she had to. After all, she would be seeing him a lot on her trips back and forth with the cargo. She had to make the best of things.

She waited for him for an hour, but he did not return. She checked the flyer, and discovered the engine had been refueled and the pressurized oxygen storage tanks refilled. The water electrolysis system—the primary source of air in the vehicle—had been replaced by a newer model. Everything had been restocked. And four large new chests stood at the back of the cabin. Curious, she went over to them, and opened one.

The first was filled with various electronics and tools, high-quality ones, useful in her father's work, as well as several bars of gold, also useful, whether in electronics or for coating mylar sheets or as plating to protect from radiation, and other applications besides. The second and third trunks were for her sisters, with dresses and jewelry in their favorite colors. Atara's trunk held a box of all kinds of makeup and hair implements, and Ozara's trunk held a box with unset gems, and gold and silver wires and chains, and other tools and things she couldn't name, things useful in jewelry design. Varda's trunk contained fabric and sewing implements, and yarn and thread, plus a rose-quartz carved box filled with the rose seeds she had wanted. Behind the trunks sat a small three-dimensional printer in a previously empty niche; it was useful for all kinds of things, like making a replacement for a broken part on a lunar flyer.

She sat back and stared. Her father must have told the beast much about them. These had been the sisters' requests of their father when he had set out to recover his fortunes, as well as what he wished for. She knew these items—or very similar items—had been in the very first container, one of the four destroyed in the crash. Either the beast had rescued some of the cargo himself, or he had given out of his own supply. If the carved wood of the chests was any indication, she guessed it had to be the latter, or even

both. On top of the containers she would soon take back, the gifts seemed like excess, a good measure, running over. How could she ever thank him?

Hunger drove her back into the base, and she followed the robot to a different gazebo, a different rug, a different table, a different tablecloth—she had a feeling that the server robots were showing off, though such an action was ludicrous from programmed beings—and a different meal. It was simple, but good, with more baked potatoes, several types of beans, steamed vegetables, a salad and dressing, a well-cooked steak, and a tall carafe of water. It was delicious, but her sisters would call it unoriginal, for it lacked imagination and seasoning. Perhaps that was one way she could repay and thank the beast, for she had the skills of a chef in the kitchen.

Unearthing an actual paper cookbook in the library, in case she needed it, though she had a good memory and knew what she wanted to serve, Varda headed for the storage area beneath the house, and gasped when she walked into the space.

It was even more immense than she had pictured, with one huge section filled with liquid nitrogen freezer compartments, another filled with dried food, another with canned food, and she was glad for the data pad, which she preferred to use over the helpful robot that was her nearly constant companion now.

A personal server robot … she had not had such a thing since before the cargo's loss, and she had easily gotten used to life without it. It was harder for her sisters, who often complained about the loss of their robot and human servants—many of the rich and almost rich preferred to be waited on by humans, using server robots for mundane tasks like simple cleaning. Well, she had always been self-sufficient, and thought having an aide to dress her and brush her hair was silly, human or robot.

It took her several hours, but she was able to locate what she needed, and more server robots helped carry it upstairs to the kitchen. She had cancelled the dinner order in the system, which had varied little from the noon meal, and now she tasked the kitchen robots with helping her. After some diligent work she had a lovely three-course meal, seasoned and sweetened to perfection. Only now she wondered if she had overstepped her place, and she worried as the robots wheeled the carts into the private dining room.

Thinking quickly, she ran to her quarters and changed into the silk gown and matching shoes, both made of a shimmering color halfway between silver and white, as well as a platinum necklace with a small pendant composed of the clearest diamonds in a stylized rose design—the necklace had been hidden in the folds of the dress. The outfit was really quite gorgeous; and it had been quite a while since Varda had worn a dress.

Griff was already there, seated at the foot of the table in an enormously tall carved chair, its seat and back padded in dark green velvet. Another server robot pulled back an identical chair at its head. The chandelier was turned down low in a convincing imitation of candlelight—true candles could be a hazard on a Moon base. There was also a lit fireplace to the left, the imitation flames leaping and crackling—it was delightfully realistic. A water feature faced the fireplace, and the soft murmuring of running water filled the air. The sounds—along with the air circulating through the rooms—were pleasant to listen to, and she allowed the soothing babble to flow over her and smooth out the rough edges of stress lingering on the fringes of her consciousness. A vase filled with golden roses was placed in the center of the table, and she was pleasantly surprised to see it was resting on the embroidered cloth she had given him.

“Greetings, Varda,” said Griff, rising from his chair for a bow. The syllables bounced in his mouth, like rocks caught in an engine, hitting metal with each turn.

“Greetings, Beast.” She said the words without thinking, and then quickly covered her mouth at the mistake, shrinking back in the chair in embarrassment and fear.

He smiled, showing white teeth and four long canines. Then, incredibly, he laughed. At least, she thought it had to be a laugh.

“You may call me anything you like, Varda. It is true: I am a beast. And you are a beautiful rose, a bright star in the sky.” He paused. “Especially next to someone like me.”

She stared at him. It was true. Her middle name, Adara, meant “beauty,” and her first name, Varda, meant “rose.” And Adara was also the name of one of the brightest stars. But how did he know?

“Do you know many languages, then?” she asked, curiosity replacing the fear.

He shrugged his shoulders in a self-deprecating way. “Only a small amount, not even enough to impress.”

“Could you tell me what the words mean, the ones engraved over the front door? Other than the first word, which I believe means either ‘joy’ or ‘rejoice,’ I do not recognize the words.”

“*Gaudete cum laetitia, qui in tristitia fuistis*,” he recited. “It means: ‘Rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow.’ It is a family saying, I believe you would call it, though I fear my family has had more sorrow than joy, and as I am the only one left, I am afraid it will be forgotten soon, and like the dead language it came from, it will pass into the night, unnoticed, unremembered.”

He was quiet for a while, and Varda stayed silent, listening to the sounds of fire and water and air. For she heard the unspoken words; that he would pass into the night, unnoticed, unremembered, long before the stone mansion would crumble to dust.

“Shall we begin?”

Varda looked up to see him looking at her expectantly, gesturing at the table laid before them.

“I hope you are not upset about the food,” she began, the words coming out in a nervous rush. “It’s just … I know how to cook, and you don’t have a human cook here, and—”

“And you thought it must have been awhile since I have had such things?”

She blushed.

“Yes, it has been awhile. I lack the time or the skill to do it myself, and I have always been content with what they serve,” Griff said, gesturing to the robots, who came forward and filled the goblets with water. This time, Varda allowed them to serve portions of the first course onto her plate.

As they ate, Varda watched him, careful not to stare. He was slow and deliberate with his movements, his large hands awkward, but sure and steady, and she guessed it had taken months for him to learn the skill.

When the second course was served, Varda broke the heavy stillness that had settled over them like an oppressive fog.

“Could you tell me more about you? I know little, besides what is commonly known. I don’t even know how you survived.”

Griff looked down at his hands, resting on the table, as if searching for an answer, or for the courage to face the answer. “After she did this to me, after I first began to change, and knew what had been done—” he stopped then, his voice thick, his words thin. He shook his head, as if to rid himself

of the bad memories, but memories could not be forgotten in such a way, no matter how much one might wish it. After a moment he seemed to compose himself.

“Our family fled. We felt we had no choice. I believe it angered her that we did. I believe she must have had someone under her control working for us, capable of planting the bombs aboard our ship, or perhaps she did it herself, as part of some contingency plan. I do not think I will ever know, and I do not think it matters. The first bomb went off halfway between the Moon and Earth. The blast killed my father instantly and severely injured my mother. Our ship was well-made, and somehow the explosion did not breach the hull. I believe the first explosion was only meant to cripple the craft. Without gravity, blood was everywhere, mostly hers and his, floating in the air in shimmering droplets, like some obscene rain caught mid-fall. I was bleeding too, but the wound was far less severe, the blood already clotting in my fur.

“I do not know how she did it, for I was far larger and far stronger than she was—not as large as I am now, nor as strong, but as a sixteen-year-old boy I was still stronger than my petite mother—but she forced me into the nearest of the escape modules before I could even open my mouth to breathe, and the next moment I was hurtling out to space, and my last memory of her was of watching her collapse, unconscious, hanging in the air, surrounded by a bloody mist.”

He paused for a moment, fork poised above his plate, food forgotten. Varda wondered if either of them would be able to eat any more.

“I had hit my head, and I found it hard to think straight. I barely had enough energy to strap myself into the chair as it plunged back to the Moon. All of our escape modules were programmed with one of two choices: this place, here on the Moon, or another home, there on the Earth. When the explosion occurred, we must have been closer to the Moon, for that is what the autopilot computer chose.

“Still, I had to try to see what became of her. And then I looked out the rear viewscreen just in time to see the second explosion hit. Debris scattered everywhere, my mind scattered with it. I passed out then, and only woke when the autopilot landed here. And I have been here ever since that day two years ago, and I may very well be here the rest of my life, however long or short it may be.”

It was hard to speak, suddenly, as Varda felt her throat close and her eyes close. Memories hit her with all the unsubtle force of a dust storm, invading the cracks of her mind. Before her eyes she once again saw her own mother, body bloody and broken. She had screamed back then, screamed until her voice was gone. Later, her sisters—who, unlike Varda, had not witnessed the crash—had screamed too, as Sanna's body had been laid into a hole into the ground, into a place so close they could touch it, but further away than they could ever imagine. Varda could only weep.

"You could confront the one who killed your family," Varda said, forcing the memories away with the speed of a rocket. They would do her no good now.

"Yes, but if I do others would be in danger."

"Who?"

He shook his great head. "I have already told you more than I should." He started to eat again, resolute and resolved, but she could tell he took no joy of it. And when she joined him, neither did she.

After they finished the third and final course, a lovely vanilla dessert that may as well have been ashes, Griff turned to go.

"Griff, wait."

He paused and turned toward her, his gold eyes as piercing as thorns.

She closed her eyes at the terrible sight. "I leave tomorrow morning to take the first containers to Medii," she said. "Before I go, I just wanted to … to thank you for all you've done. The repaired containers, the gifts in the flyer, the roses, the—"

He waved a hand in dismissal, cutting her off. "It was … is nothing," he said, with something like anger in his voice, but she sensed the emotion was not directed at her, but at himself instead. "You may take anything else here that you desire as well," he continued in a quieter voice. "As I said, everything I have is yours. Everything." With that, he left at last, heavy footsteps echoing down the hall.

There was something hidden in that last word, and she wondered if somehow he had given her the only thing left to him that was human: his soul. Though perhaps it was merely the memories of shared sorrows, only there was no rejoicing at the end.

Chapter 8

Varda woke while stars still lit the sky simulator. The chief personal server robot—she couldn't go on calling it that; she needed to think up a name—came up to her room with a space pill instead of breakfast, as requested. Many preferred to take the space pill during zero- or low-gravity spaceflight, as it took care of nutritional needs while preventing any stomach or intestinal upset, and Varda had always been sensitive to such things.

Dressed once more in her gray travel outfit, Varda paused only a moment to borrow a few books—despite what he said, she planned to return them—if only for the feel and the smell. She could read any she desired on the data pad, which she was also borrowing as she lacked one of her own, but it had been so long since she had been around any real books, all of hers long since sold, and the bases had only a paid library of electronic books anyway. When she got back to Earth, she might buy a library full. With one last look at the golden rose in its vase, she turned and departed.

It was dawn by the time she left—another two cargo containers had been brought in for repairs, making her wonder when he slept, if he slept—and relief filled her when she was at last in the air. It was still lunar night, and would be lunar night during her entire trip to Medii.

The entire flight was unmemorable, and Varda, daring to take the suit off—like everyone else she usually wore it for safety reasons, even in the pressurized cabin—read some of one of the books—an old Earth classic—and spent the rest of the time crocheting a blanket, her fingers quick and sure, and she got a great deal of it finished. She stopped when she saw the buried domes of Medii Base ahead, illuminated by light.

Medii Base was by far the largest base on the Moon, four times the size of any other. It was located at the exact center of the Moon as seen from Earth. At the south edge was the space elevator shipping and receiving department. The elevator on the Moon extended about 35,000 miles out from the base into space, its narrow graphene ribbon unseen, its docking port—Medii Docking Station—high above her. Both the Earth and the Moon had space elevators extending into space, which helped lower fuel costs between the two. Cargo containers, passenger cars, command modules, and engines were brought up the elevator by mechanical

climbing vehicles—operated by space traffic control—which were connected to the ribbon by wheels straddling either side. At the docking ports, command modules—manned if there were passengers, unmanned if not—and engines were attached to either end of the cargo containers or passenger cars by the partly automated system, and the electromagnetic drive engines ferried the ships between the Earth and the Moon. And when the ships neared their destination, space traffic control took over, bringing the ships down the ribbons all the way to the elevator receiving department.

She could not go that way, so she headed toward one of the regular hangars that handled the lunar flyers and rovers. Hours earlier she had alerted them of her arrival, and they were ready for her, which meant she did not have to wait long to land.

Once inside, she waited for an inventory to be made as the items were unloaded, checked, and credited to her father's—the family's—account. A number of people came over and congratulated her on the successful retrieval, and she returned many a wave and a smile from those who worked there. They knew the story of her father's loss, and many of them were glad at the news she brought of even more cargo coming soon, more because the containers had much needed things for the base, than because they wished her father well. By the time she finished making sure everything was accounted for, and loaded the four trunks on a transport vehicle, three very long and boring hours had passed.

As she suspected, her sisters were there to greet her at the main exit to the hangar. Varda couldn't help but smile. It was a common saying on the bases that "the only thing faster than the speed of light is the sound of gossip." Surely everyone on Medii Base and Peary Base and even Thule Base knew the news. She wondered if Xenos had found out as well, even though he was out on the surface of the Moon, and what he would be thinking: horror that she had gone or relief that she was back?

Her sisters could barely contain their excitement, and only the fact that people were watching them kept them from shrieking and jumping in joy. They did, however, embrace her, before climbing into the transport vehicle with her.

Instead of the tiny quarters they usually lived in, they directed her to one of the hotels found in the tourist portion of the base, and Varda watched as the two took great delight in securing larger, better rooms with

the silvers in their father's newly-rejuvenated account. Four robot valets took the trunks in.

Atara and Ozara opened the wood chests. A quarter of an hour was spent simply admiring their contents, and the rest of the hour was spent trying everything on.

Exhausted from the effort, and wearing an inordinate amount of jewelry, the twins finally turned to talk to her.

"I can't believe … father was mistaken! He's so … good about these things," Ozara said, gasping.

"How did … you do it?" Atara added, a little short of breath herself, fingering a jeweled tiara on her head.

Varda could not break her father's secret—or Griff's secret, for that matter—but she also did not want to lie, and so she said nothing at first, conflicted.

"You must tell us!" Ozara prompted.

Varda thought hard about what she could say that would betray no one. "Only the first four containers were ruined. The rest were covered in moon dust," she said at last. It was the truth, and she hoped it would be good enough for them to infer their own conclusions, which would be wrong.

"Thank heavens you thought to check the crash site again," Atara said. Her brow creased as she seemed to ponder something. "Goodness, you were out there in lunar gravity! You must be exhausted and starving!"

Though her sisters were often self-serving and thoughtless, they were more willing to think of others when they were happy.

"I am fine," she assured them, smiling. The space pill had not worn off yet.

"We'll be able to go to balls again!" Ozara clapped her hands together.

"Our friends will talk to us again!" Atara pressed a hand to her chest.

"We're rich again!" they both cried. They turned toward each other, and leapt up and down, unable to keep their excitement contained any longer.

Varda waited. Soon they dropped down into plush chairs, and Varda joined them.

"Now that you have more supplies, you can finally make all of these dresses," Atara said, pulling something out of her pocket and unfolding it, revealing several sheets of paper. Varda leaned forward in surprise, taking the first in her hand. It was a sketch she herself had done—back when they

were still on Earth—of the three of them, dressed in gowns she designed, each unique, but meant as a set.

“I thought these were long gone,” she said. She had ripped them out of her sketchbook and discarded them in the recycler not long after the crash, when she had despaired of ever being able to create them, for she had sold her most valuable supplies to help pay down her father’s debt. She had never told anyone just how much it had hurt to give up on her passion, had made sure to keep her inner feelings deep inside around her family, around everyone, but somehow her sisters had known her heart anyway, for the same blood ran through their hearts too. It was true that they had saved this sketch because they wanted the dresses on it, but they had also saved several other drawings because they knew how much they meant to Varda. Tears formed in her eyes, and she quickly wiped them away.

The second sketch showed two dresses, intended for the Sun Gala and the Moon Gala. She pulled out the third sketch. It was the dress she had wanted to make for her Twilight Gala, the dress that showed her skills in fashion design and the textile arts. Those with skills almost always displayed them off at the celebration that marked the start of their adulthood, and she had planned, long ago, to do the same. It often ensured one’s living for the rest of their life, if you wanted or needed to earn a living, and Varda did not want to have to depend on her father forever. Nearly everyone had one, whether you lived on the Moon or the Earth, whether you were rich or poor, for it was a way to forge connections and alliances. Careers had been made in such a way. But without even a suitable supply of the cloth and thread that would be necessary, not to mention the other more expensive embellishments the gown needed, Varda had given up. And now, for the first time since she had found the cargo containers, it occurred to her that she could have a proper gala of her own.

“We have the money and even some of the supplies now,” Atara pointed at the third sketch. “You have to make this and wear it at your ball. Everyone will want to wear a gown by Varda once they see this.”

“We will make sure you have the gala of the century. Everyone who is anyone will be there,” Ozara assured her. “I am already planning it in my head.”

“Maybe you will even attract the attention of Ceres!” Atara said, looking at Ozara, who nodded in agreement.

Ceres Snow, the sole owner of Thule Base, was famous and infamous, and the kind of person who sought admirers but disdained friends. Incredibly rich—only the Gold family had surpassed her—and incredibly beautiful, no one ever outshone her, for she eclipsed all foolish enough to try. More than one person that had tried had lost everything in her overwhelming shadow.

Though no longer a teenager—Ceres was thirty or more—she looked like she was at most eighteen, and many wondered about her secret. Varda wondered why she would bother. Thirty was incredibly young, especially when people could live to be a hundred and twenty.

Varda also thought Ceres' family name suited her, for she was as cold as snow. Aloof, she had never wed; though dozens upon dozens of suitors had pursued her over the years, she had rejected them, earning the name of "Ice Queen" from those who dared to speak of her, but even then only in whispers.

"I doubt Ceres would be interested in me," Varda said to her sisters at last, but she had been silent so long they were already deep into another conversation that seemed to involve which outfit would be best for the next gala.

Truthfully, Varda had never thought much about such things. It was just the way the world worked: if you wanted to work you made connections. No connection was more powerful than Ceres. Anytime Ceres desired something, others desired it as well.

But Varda wanted people to be drawn to her clothes because they liked them, not because they had been told to like them. All the silvers in the world were nothing next to the happiness she felt when someone truly loved something she had made for them. Her sisters' appreciation when she made them dresses had always been real, and she had always been happy to make clothes for them.

"Varda!"

Startled out of her thoughts, she turned toward Ozara.

"You do not know, do you? That friend of yours—I forget her name—is here! She has grown up since the last time we saw her!"

"I am not a child anymore," Varda replied, not quite being able to suppress the exasperation or the amusement.

"We know," Atara said, sighing. "It is just … you have always been our little sister. When you were born we had already been tutored for years!"

“And when we had our own twilight galas you were so young, too young to even attend,” Ozara added.

“I guess we never realized that you are finally almost an adult yourself,” Atara said.

“And now here I am, stuck between adolescence and adulthood, in some sort of strange liminal world, my very own twilight, and soon I will at last bridge the divide between us,” Varda said, a faraway look in her eyes.

“Very poetic,” Atara said, semi-mockingly. “I seem to remember you wrote a poem about twilight, though I have no idea why.”

“Could you recite it?” Ozara asked. “I fear I no longer remember it.”

“You really want to hear it?” Atara’s voice was skeptical.

“Yes, I really want to hear it. I thought it was good.”

Embarrassed at the praise, Varda nodded, and began:

“After the dawn, after the night,
Before the dusk, after the light.
No longer dark, no longer day,
Lit by last, or first, sun’s ray.
Between land, between sky,
Lo! How fast the time goes by!
Then twilight is gone at last,
For it is left within the past.
But, lo! It will come again,
Another day, or night, to begin.”

Atara shook her head. “Is that a real poem? The last verse did not quite rhyme.”

“It is a half-rhyme,” Varda explained. “Did you ignore what our tutors taught us?”

“Of course!” This was said loudly and in unison as they both laughed.

“Oh! We forgot! Your friend … um, Novia … I remember her name now! ... is here, with her new husband!” Ozara clapped her hands and the clinking sound of rings and bracelets filled the air. “She is so blessed, so lucky. Tycho is very rich,” she added, unable to keep the envy out of her voice.

“She has such beautiful taste in gowns,” Atara sighed. “But if she asks, remember you promised to make us dresses first. We need them if we hope to win Polux—and Pluto—back.”

Varda had made no such promise, but she nodded in agreement. They were her family, and family was first.

A chime at the door interrupted them.

Atara hurried over and opened the door.

“Oh, Varda! I heard the good news! I am so very, very happy for you all!” Novia stepped inside and immediately embraced Varda. And her dress *was* stunning, Varda noticed.

“I thought this was your honeymoon,” Varda said in shock. “I didn’t know you were actually planning to come to the Moon!”

“It was a surprise,” Novia said, smiling as she pulled back. “And, he wanted to get some business done here too. You know men: always practical, always rational.”

Atara and Ozara turned away as if in disgust, and went back to the gowns and gems. Varda guided her friend over a nearby chair.

“I can’t stay long,” Novia said as she sat carefully on the edge of the seat. “I do have to get back to Tycho. I just had to see you.”

“When did you get here?” Varda asked, and then shook her head as she realized she knew the answer. “Of course, two days ago was a half-moon, and they usually time passenger cars to arrive near that time, when the temperature is best.”

Varda’s friend laughed. “I’d call it sunrise or sunset, and I think this last one would be called sunset, but it is not quite the same as it is on Earth, is it? Then again, it isn’t like we can see the real Moon sky in these domes.”

“Just visit one of the observatories, or go on a lunar or rover tour,” Varda replied.

Novia smiled. “I’m sure we will tour them all. Tycho says he has it all planned. I just know we’ll go to see the crater he was named for, and I am looking forward to riding the maglev vacuum train to Peary.” Gripping Varda’s arm, she continued. “I was so worried when you didn’t return my messages when I first got here. Your sisters did not seem worried, telling me you must be working somewhere. And then I heard the news!”

“I know. Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed, like my heart has filled to overflowing with untamable emotion,” Varda replied.

“And I as well. I am so very blessed to have found Tycho. Perhaps on some future day you will find the one who is meant to share your heart.”

“To tell you the truth, I have not thought much about it.” Varda shrugged. “When I was back on Earth, I was too young, and now, I have

been so busy, so worried about my father, that such things have lost importance. And I *am* a year younger than you! I have time."

"Well, you can make up for any lost time! I came over here to invite you to the Summer Gala. It is one week from now. I will be performing! And Tycho will be busy after that. Perhaps we could spend some time together."

"Sounds lovely!" Varda leaned forward and clasped Novia's hands. "I would be honored to accept. But I do need to retrieve the rest of the cargo containers, which will take quite a lot of time. And I have other promises to keep," Varda continued, as she thought of a lonely beast in a far-away castle.

"You truly are as good as gold," Novia said. "Of course you have other plans."

The two embraced one last time, and then Novia was gone. Varda stood for a while staring at the closed door, as if she was looking at a carved wooden one instead; and if she would only open it, she would see Griff's terrible golden gaze looking back at her.

Chapter 9

The next days passed slowly for Varda at Medii Base. In truth, the time spent traveling, with little break, was wearying. Her sisters, however, were energized, and the twins were already immersed back in their former lives. The friends who had shunned them only days before had come back, many pretending that nothing had ever parted them in the first place. Still others proclaimed it to be a redeeming story of riches to rags to riches. Either way, they were soon the most sought-after companions at the base, receiving countless invitations to dinners and balls and every event that anyone who was, well, anyone, went to. Varda was invited as well, but she turned them down, pleading exhaustion, promising to attend the Summer Gala later. When the invitations—hand-lettered and hand-delivered—got to be too much, Varda moved her trunk and what little she owned to her sisters' old quarters. They were meager rooms, but they were quiet, and, most importantly, they were in a place far from the nicer domiciles of the wealthy. Few would pursue her here.

She spent much of that time working on the three matching dresses, and with her precise, quick sewing, she finished the basic underlying garments, done in an almost shimmering gray fabric. The bulk of the time spent on the dresses would involve embroidery using silver-colored thread and silver-colored ribbons, and, perhaps, some beadwork as well. It would take at least several earth-weeks of work for each garment, at the very least, and she would not be surprised if it took three or four months to finish them all. Ozara had already agreed to design the matching jewelry to Varda's specifications: a crown for Atara, a necklace for Ozara, and a belt for Varda; Atara would be in charge of hair and makeup. The gowns would be worn at the Winter Gala, which should give Varda enough time to finish the three dresses, as well as the fourth dress that she would wear at her own Twilight Gala, which would be held ten days earlier.

Varda's sisters had already been contacted by their former fiancés, who, like their former friends, had returned to them, and were trying to pretend nothing had happened. Atara and Ozara were feigning disinterest and dissatisfaction, prompting Polux and Pluto, who were still on Earth, to announce their plans to return to the Moon by the end of the year, if not earlier.

Varda's father—who was still out mining—had contacted her as well. In a carefully worded message, he apologized for the deception, expressed pleasure at the return of his fortunes, and conveyed how happy he was that she was safe, telling her that he had only hid the truth out of fear for her life, but now he saw how wrong he had been. Out of honor and duty, he would finish out the next four months of his contract, but then he would retire from mining for good. Varda had expected the news. It was the best she could have hoped for, and she would gladly take it. Months was far better than years.

Three days after her return to Medii Base, Varda left once more for the far side of the Moon. She brought the gowns with her, hoping to make a nice start on the embroidery, though she knew she would probably concentrate on making garments for Griff while she was there. And she did make a lovely start on them, spending nearly the entire trip sewing after she went over them one last time to make sure the placement of the design elements was correct and symmetrical.

When she finally arrived, she saw that the cargo containers previously scattered over the surface of White Crater were gone and the wreckage had been cleared. Only a few blemishes remained on the surface to show they had even been there at all. Varda drove the flyer into the hangar to discover that—as she had expected—the cargo containers were all there, in various stages of repair, ready for her.

She had not expected there to be more.

There were also large plastic and metal boxes—roughly the size of the trunks from before—which she recognized as being the storage bins that filled each cargo container. It wasn't a large amount—just a negligible portion of each wrecked container—but it was at least something of what Varda had given up as lost. Griff must have been busy, salvaging all he could from the Moon's surface while she was gone. When she left in several days, she knew she would find them loaded into her flyer.

The data pad revealed he was at the secondary hangar. Varda did not know what to expect when she got there, for the flyers and rovers of that hangar had seemed to be in good repair, but what she found was still unexpected. A huge workshop was in an extension of the hangar off to one side, filled with wood, metal, supplies, and tools—more supplies and tools than she could hope to name. Griff sat before a workbench, carving; his movements slow and steady, his eyes covered by round safety glasses. It

gave him an owlish look, and she had to suppress a grin before it turned into a laugh.

He smiled when he saw her, stood, and bowed. She smiled back, a little hesitantly. He seemed to bow a lot, though the old-fashioned gesture did not seem out of place, somehow. Curious, she walked forward to see what he was working on. It appeared to be a door panel, meant for a sideboard, with holes for hinges and handle already drilled. He had been carving roses, leaves, and vines in its surface. She guessed he was no more than one-fourth done. Looking to the side she saw a small cabinet about two-and-a-half feet high and four feet wide, resting on sturdy, rectangular legs. Shelves were already inside, though none of the four doors were attached; presumably, the one he was working on now was the first.

"Is that …" Varda hesitated.

"For you? Yes," Griff answered, as he went back to his work.

"You don't need to do that," she answered, as she watched the chips of wood fly. "I am the one who owes you, after all."

He stopped carving, and she waited for him to speak.

"It has been so long—too long—since I have had something to do that is for someone besides myself," he said at last. The words were quiet and as carefully measured as each piece of wood, cut to the correct specifications. "I enjoy it. Did you not enjoy cooking for me? Do you not enjoy sewing for your family? Can I not share my time and my talent with you as well? Can I not share my moments and my memories?"

"You are right," Varda said, slightly chagrined, and she blushed—or, at least, she thought she must be blushing, for her cheeks had turned as hot as if they had been burned by the sunlight. She felt herself relax. It was the first time she had truly been relaxed in his presence, she realized. The thought made her smile again.

He gestured toward a stool nearby, and Varda pulled it over, and for quite a while she simply sat and watched him work, sometimes with her head leaning on her hand, her elbow leaning on the bench, sometimes leaning over the bench in an effort to get a closer look, her own safety glasses perched on her face.

As time passed she felt herself begin to relax. Perhaps it was only because of the glasses he wore: with them on, his horribly strange eyes were hidden. If she squinted at him, the fur on his face merely looked like skin.

Sometimes she asked questions, and he was happy to answer them. And sometimes he asked questions, and she was also happy to answer them. He told her of the very first thing he had ever carved at the age of seven, a heart from a bar of soap, and which had turned out to be slightly lopsided, though his mother claimed it was perfect, and he supposed she must have been right. And she told him of the very first thing she had ever sewn at the age of eight, a handkerchief with a lily embroidered on it, and the lily had ended up looking wilted and also lopsided, with huge visible knots of thread on its surface, though of course her mother also claimed it was perfect, and so she also supposed her mother must have been right. They laughed together then, and in her heart Varda cursed the one who had done such a thing to him, who had kept such a man from the world, for he was genuinely kind and very hardworking, and there seemed to be few enough like him.

It was then that Varda realized she cared if he was happy. She had felt sorry for him, of course: he had lost his entire family, and compared to him, she had lost so little. Underneath the ugly body and ugly eyes he was still an eighteen-year-old who had no one to care for him. Two years alone! Varda's heart squeezed at the thought. How had he borne it? How had he come out of it still relatively sane? Without the love of her father and friends—and even of her sisters, though they had never been close with the seven year age difference between them—she wondered if she would have fared as well as he had. By all rights, he should not be so stable. The grief could have overwhelmed him, and hardened his heart. But it hadn't. Admiration filled her. He was a good man, despite his threat toward her father. She needed to remember that, to write the words on her heart where she would never forget them.

It was only when the main robot appeared that she realized more than three hours had passed and she was hungry. The two of them followed it—she still could not bring herself to walk close to Griff, for she was still afraid of him—to yet another gazebo set for a lovely dinner. The sky simulator's sun was almost past the simulator's horizon, so there were moonglass lamps lit all around, casting a warm glow. It was the same humble fare as before, and this time they enjoyed their meal, any shadows chased away by the light of the lamps and the light of their faces. Varda found she could nearly look him in the eyes. His face and his features were

still so strange to her, though, and she wondered if she would ever truly get used to them.

After dinner was done he left her at last—with a bow and a grave “good night”—so she went back to her rooms. There were fresh roses in vases of ceramic and crystal, silver and gold. She went past them to the sewing room.

There was so much to choose from, but she at last settled on a medium grayish-brown tweed in a twill weave, as well as some dark brown cotton. The first was a hard-wearing fabric, and she thought it would look good next to his fur. The computer system gave her his basic measurements from his last scan, and since they appeared to be accurate—her skill with sewing meant that Varda had always had an eye for such things—she set out to make several patterns for pants, a shirt, and coat, gathering other items like buttons and thread and hemming tape, plus scissors and pins.

She was not as good at making clothing for men as she was at making clothing for women, but that was more because she had little chance to do such things. Still, she found it was easier than she expected, and she only had to make a few adjustments to account for his somewhat strangely-shaped body. Her hands flew as they pushed fabric through the sewing machine, almost quicker than thought, the needle a blur as it stitched.

Once she started, she found it hard to stop, and she added pockets and buttons and buttonholes where needed. She lined the pants and coat with some dark brown silk fabric she found during a second frantic trip through the fabric cabinets. When at last the cuffs were finished and the final buttons sewn on, she discovered that it was past midnight. Summoning the main personal server robot, she instructed it to give the clothes to its master, and then, alone at last, the exhausted Varda fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

When she woke up not that much longer after dawn, she felt more refreshed than she had in a long time, despite the short hours of sleep. A warm bath was even more invigorating, and so she set out with a light heart for breakfast.

Griff was waiting for her. She was surprised to realize that she was glad to see him, even if she avoided looking at his eyes. So she looked at the rest of him.

And she was even more glad to see that he was dressed in the new outfit, and that the fit was impeccable.

“Though I guessed you would make me some new clothes—I know mine are rather lacking—I must admit I had not expected such a thing so soon. Major told me just how long you worked on it, and I must thank you. It is the nicest thing I have worn in years. You did not have to finish it so quickly.”

“I am sure you can understand that when the creative drive hits, sometimes you do not want to stop,” she said as she sat down to breakfast. Waving away the robot servers, she reached out for a spoon and then paused, remembering what he had said.

“Major?” she asked, confused.

“That is what I ended up naming it,” he replied as he sat down across from her. “I thought about just calling it robot, like all the others, but it needed a name. It is the equivalent of a human majordomo, so I called it Major, for short.”

“I have to admit it is a good choice,” she said, transferring eggs and potatoes onto her plate. “I myself was frustrated knowing what to call it, and the name is truly perfect.”

They ate for a while in silence. At last, nearly done, Varda looked toward Griff.

“What do you do most days? How can you possibly run such a base by yourself? At the very least, there should be dozens of workers.”

He nodded. “You are right. It is difficult, though not as difficult as one would think. But I have always been a hard worker, and this body, strange as it is, is capable of great strength and stamina, and I need little sleep. I can space out the various duties throughout the year, and I concentrate on the most important ones first. I do not do the less important—less necessary—work if I do not have the time. Everything here is reasonably new and top quality, and there are many more robots you have not seen to help in most of my tasks. Plus, I can fix many of the problems myself, and any I cannot fix, I contract out.”

“How can you do that?” Varda could not hide the astonishment from her voice.

“The usual way,” he answered. “I guess you must not know much about how this base is run? Did you not access the computer? You have full access.”

“Do you mean you have dedicated communications access to the other bases?”

“Yes. Mostly Medii, though Peary has also been essential in the help I need to maintain the solar arrays. I may even have hired your father at some time, without his knowledge.”

Varda’s father had indeed taken on such jobs. Though it was usually preferable to have an expert on-site for most tasks, occasionally things could be handled via remote access using long-distance communications, like when space traffic control at the lunar elevator directed the ships coming in. At the very least, advice on how to fix a problem could be conveyed.

“You mean I can communicate with my family?” Varda sat up straighter in her chair.

“You always could, if you wished. I also have access to the major news networks, plus entertainment broadcasts,” he said. “I do not often use them, myself, though I have from time to time. It helps, if only a little, with the solitary life I lead.”

His voice had a reflective, resigned tone, and Varda could not detect any self-pity, though she thought he, of all people, had the right.

“Would you like to contact your family?” he asked.

“I had not really thought about it,” she admitted. “Father is still out mining, and my sisters are undoubtedly busy, so probably not right now, though it is a good thing to know that I can send and receive messages, just in case there is an emergency while I am gone. Communications from the lunar flyer are hit and miss—most often miss—on this side of the Moon.”

“Yes, I know. When my father had this base built over thirty years ago, he knew he needed a reliable way to contact the other bases.” Griff turned back to his breakfast.

Varda smiled at him, still finding it hard to meet his eyes when he looked at her. She felt ashamed that she could not look at him now, and so busied herself with the data pad. A dedicated communications network was indeed set up. It was a simple matter to enter it and then to access her personal talk net account on the servers at Medii Station. Nothing from her sisters or father, which didn’t surprise her as it had only been a few days.

Novia had sent a short letter, and Varda smiled when she read it. She had missed her friend so much during the past year, and the memory of seeing her again, of feeling the happiness and warmth she always felt around someone she loved, was a memory she would cherish. Perhaps once the

cargo was ferried she could go home, to her friends and her home, to her life.

There were dozens of vids from people she only vaguely knew as being connected to her sisters. Instead of watching them, for they would take several hours to go through, she had the computer convert them to text files and did a quick read through. Mostly they were invitations to events, along with the usual insincere greetings and salutations. But there were also requests for commissions—phrased in an oblique manner, as was commonly done among the upper classes to avoid the appearance that one was actually asking another for something—of gowns and other garments. No doubt her sisters had been spreading the news of her skills, though it was probably more so that others would envy them when they were the only ones wearing Varda's designs at the Winter Gala. The invitations did not need a response unless she planned on going, and so as she ate the last of her breakfast she replied to the commission queries with the expected response saying that she would be delighted if her schedule permitted. Still, she doubted her schedule would permit it, at least for the next few months, even if she did want to take on any of their commissions.

Done with the morning meal at last, she saw that Griff had been patiently waiting for her to finish. Flustered now, she turned toward him and found she could nearly look him in the eyes. When she had first met him it had been hard to look away, mostly because fear led her to keep him in sight. But now the fear was gone, and all she could think about was how alien he looked, how beastlike.

"I was wondering if you might spend some time with me this morning," Griff said, his voice clearly expecting her to decline. Now he was the one looking away. "If you are agreeable, some of the servant robots could bring any of the sewing implements you need out here, perhaps to a small meadow, and others could likewise bring my carving instruments out as well, and perhaps we could talk while we worked."

"I would like that," Varda said, and was astonished when she realized that she meant it.

With the help of the robots, they were soon set up in a charming spot surrounded by trees and roses. She found that he was easy to talk to, and they continued their conversation from the day before, sharing memories of their families and childhoods. Griff had never been to Earth, and so he asked her many questions about it, explaining that his father had always

been too busy working to take a vacation that far away, and his mother and brothers—who had all been born on the Moon—had not sought to leave the place they had always lived. He didn't say it, but Varda thought that he, unlike the rest of the Gold family, would have welcomed a visit to Earth.

After sharing a simple lunch with her, Griff took his leave, explaining that there were many tasks he needed to finish on the base. Varda went back to her quarters, putting aside the embroidery of the morning to concentrate on sewing another outfit for him, this time in shades of black and granite gray. After spending several hours making a decent start on it, she went once again to the food storage area and soon had the robots helping her to make a different three-course meal for them to share, with roasted mushrooms in a garlic butter sauce, some eggplant parmesan, and a hot apple and cinnamon pie.

Griff joined her again for dinner. The three server robots in her quarters had put out a new outfit that afternoon. This time it was a brown knit gown, simple and floor-length, with a scoop neck that accented the chunky gold necklace set with four large brown tiger eye cabochons and three even larger chocolate diamonds. The diamonds were in a round, domed rose cut—now one of the most popular cuts for less brilliant diamonds and a revival of an old, antique style, according to Ozara—with six triangular "star facets" in the center; resembling a smaller version of the geodesic domes on the moon. Matching gold clasp bracelets alternated smaller—but still substantial—versions of the two types of stones. Brown velvet slippers—and a small brown velvet handbag of just the right size to carry the data pad she had taken to carrying around with her—completed the look. It was only when she went down again and saw Griff waiting for her in the dining room, wearing the garments she had made, that she realized the outfit she wore had been chosen because the colors nearly matched his. She laughed at the thought, and he smiled at her with that same strange smile, his eyes glinting in the light.

Unlike the first meal she had made for him, she was determined that they would finish all three courses, and so she chose an innocuous subject for conversation: what he had done that afternoon. He told her about his day in the hydroponics bay. How both the hydroponics and aquaponics bays were always planted with enough to feed three, in case anything went wrong—nothing had gone wrong yet—with the excess being stored by freezing, drying, or canning. He had a year-round harvest, like all the bases

did, but he harvested smaller amounts every month, instead of the usual four times a year. He gave her tips on gardening and beekeeping—real bees had always been preferred for pollination—and, when she asked, declared he would be happy to get her some fresh honey for the next night's meal. A quick search on the data pad gave her several recipe possibilities, and when he told her his crop included a peach tree, Varda chose a honey and peach cake, as well as honey-glazed chicken.

He left with the same nod and a bow and a grave "good night" as before. The gesture really was old-fashioned and extremely formal, and not for the first time she felt as though she was living in the past, in an age of myths and stories.

* * *

The next two days passed in much the same manner. A simple breakfast, followed by time spent together—him carving, her embroidering, both talking—and then a simple lunch, followed by time spent apart—both working—and at last a dinner prepared by Varda, after which she retired to her rooms to sew or read and he went out to finish any unfinished tasks from that day. She soon finished a second outfit for Griff and started on a third.

The morning after that she readied for the return home. Three days: that was the optimal time to spend in earth-normal gravity to balance the time spent in lunar gravity. She would spend at least three days at either here or Medii between the trips. Barring delay, it would take less than three months to take the needed round trips between the two bases to bring the rest of the cargo containers back to her father.

She left for the hangar early, while it was still twilight. Griff was there, presumably to bid her farewell, having discussed the time of her departure with her the night before.

"May the stars guide your way," he said, his voice low. She was getting used to his strange voice, to the odd cadences that came from a mouth with overlarge, sharp teeth. She could hear the kindness and sincerity now in the words.

Filled with a sudden rush of happiness at his words—though she didn't know why—she smiled, and turned to go. As she walked up the steps into the flyer, she went over what she needed to remember to do once on board, the last of which would be to alter the flight coordinates to conceal exactly where she came from, just in case an employee at Medii Space Traffic

Control got too curious. She would not give away his secret. It was then that she remembered a question she had wanted to ask him, but had forgotten in the wake of so many other questions.

“How come no one knows about this place? How did you keep it a secret?” Varda asked.

He was walking away, but he stopped at her words and came back, standing below her as she stood on the ladder. “I do not think it was meant to be a secret, but my father had always been a private person. For many years he lived here with my mother and my brothers and I. The three of us were even born here. And for a while, it was a good life. But as they grew older, my brothers wanted more friends their own age. I was only three or four then, not yet old enough to really notice how limited our lives were. But it was hard for everyone on this base, so far away from the world. The other bases were joined by the maglev vacuum train. We were not. It had become harder to keep workers here for more than a few seasons at a time, even paying three times more than they could have earned elsewhere. So the base was closed. Those that worked for us went back to the four corners of the Earth, wealthy themselves now, for my father had always been generous to those in his employ. As for us, we moved to Medii. Soon, it was like we had always lived there. Years passed, and my brothers found friends—and later fiancées—their age. All seemed ideal. And then it was like an ill wind came. I suppose you know some of the story?” He looked at Varda, who nodded, and he continued.

“Almost everyone abandoned us out of fear. I do not—I cannot—blame them. We found it difficult to live on the Moon. Our lives were even more constrained, even more limited. As were our hearts, for we feared to love and trust during those dark times. My mother and my father were almost broken by the deaths of their first two sons. I know they—and I as well—would have given everything we owned just to have them back, but it was impossible. Human hands cannot rob the grave, human hearts cannot conquer death. But we still had hope of seeing them again, once we all pass beyond the veil of this world. And so we decided to move to Earth. In secret, my father had a home built there, a secluded place for us to hide for a while, until he could find out who our enemy was. For we all knew we had an enemy. It was no curse. But our plans to flee were discovered, and you already know some of what happened then.”

“You know who it was, but you won’t tell me,” Varda said.

“Yes, I know, but I cannot tell you. Too many are already in danger.”

“Do you know why this happened to your family?” Varda could feel the desperation rising in her voice.

“Yes.”

“Is there no justice for you?”

“I do not know if I even desire justice for myself. I know there are others more deserving than I. I think the only thing that has kept me alive is the thought that I might be able to help them one day, though I see no way ahead. All is darkness, for me and for them,” he said, shaking his head in pain, looking at her, his eyes dark. “It was the foolish hope of a child, too young to know better. I should have just faced the truth. There is no hope for anyone.”

Stricken to the spot—as if an arrow or a knife had suddenly plunged into her chest, cutting off the flow of life, of air and of blood—she gazed at him in horror. So he had given up hope. It was not what she had first thought.

How had she been wrong? She knew he was filled with sadness, but not that it overshadowed him so. She found then for the first time that she could truly look him in the eyes, and she saw the humanity that was still there, a tragic humanity, injured deeply by loss, perhaps too deeply for real healing.

How had she not noticed it before? A surge of pity and compassion filled her. When she came back she would try to look at him, try to give him the hope that had died, the faith he had forgotten, the love he had lost. She would try to be a friend. He needed a friend, and she was ashamed to admit she had not acknowledged that fact to herself until now.

But first she would have to overcome her first instinct, which was to look away from him, and so she met his gaze, not flinching this time.

After a few moments he looked away from her, as if he saw himself reflected in her eyes, and didn’t like what he saw. Or maybe that was only her imagination.

“You must go,” he said. There was a bitterness to his voice that he could not quite hide.

Varda watched as he shook his head, and then forced a smile on his face. It was false, and she barely repressed a shudder at the sight.

He gripped the ladder’s sides. “Have a safe journey.” His voice had returned—well, almost returned—to normal. Normal for him, anyway.

As she flew the flyer away under a starless sky, she found it hard to forget that terrible sad smile, cutting across his face like a gash, blood about to spill.

Chapter 10

The Summer Gala, like all the major galas, was held in the largest ballroom of the largest hotel on Medii Base. The high circular rotunda at its peak was the deepest and darkest black color in the world, having been lined with a “super black” coating made up of carbon nanotubes. It would have been like looking into an abyss, but for the small lights embedded in the domed ceiling, in a random pattern that evoked the starry sky. Her father had told her once that the carbon nanotubes were also used to help astronomical cameras and telescopes function better at the small unmanned observation outpost on the far side of the Moon, seventy miles away from Peary Base.

The ballroom was also one of the few places on the Moon to have extensive woodwork covering the walls, between the floor-to-ceiling windows and doors. A rich brown stain highlighted the grain of the wood. Clear, globe-shaped moonglass sconces were hung on the walls, and matching chandeliers ringed the border of the rotunda. In the center was a circular revolving stage, lit by similar small lights around the edge. Throughout the many decades since the place had been built, numerous entertainers and performers had graced the shining black stage. Now Novia was there, adorned in a glittering black and white dress as sleek as the stage, sitting in front of an equally sleek black and white moonglass piano, her fingers expertly running down the keys.

Novia was a musical prodigy, but Varda could still remember the meek, haunted eight-year-old, cowed by overly ambitious and strict parents, who was talented but fearful, and who had begun to hate the very thing she loved. And so her performances suffered greatly, and her parents had been uncompromising, pressuring their daughter to practice more and more, and Novia became even more timid and withdrawn, barely able to play the simplest of tunes. It had become a vicious circle spiraling downward with no bottom in sight.

Varda, herself a quiet girl, had seen this, and so she did what she could and befriended the lonely Novia, and the two spent what time they could together, even if they had to sneak away from tutors and parents.

They were nearly separated because of their disobedience, and would have been, except when Novia’s parents at last found them in an unused attic on their estate they saw something unexpected: their daughter was

smiling as she played on her portable keyboard. Then they heard it: joy infusing each note until the sound burst open, like morning glories unfolding and turning their petals toward the sun, revealing the golden star within. And when Novia at last saw them standing there she pulled her hands away from the keys, gasping in fear, the music gone, replaced by a strangely loud silence.

And Novia's mother had wept, and her father had gripped her shoulder, and pulled her close, both speechless. Varda, watching from a corner, where she had sat embroidering as she encouraged her friend, had been silent, and tried to quietly leave, but the weeping Filis embraced her. From then on Varda was always welcome at the Mill home, and Novia came out of her shy shell.

The two families became friends soon after, and Varda's mother, Sanna, later told Xenos and Varda how much the Mill family had changed, becoming more friendly and less aloof. And when Sanna died, the families had grieved together.

As the years passed, the two girls remained close. And when Novia found success with other instruments and with voice lessons, Varda attended every recital and concert, and spent countless more hours with her as she practiced, patiently listening, and practicing her own sewing as well. Even when they got older, and other interests and activities and education meant less time together, they still sent letters and vids to each other. Then Varda's family had lost their fortunes, and found themselves stranded on the Moon. The Mills were the only family from their past who did not shun them. Novia had sent messages often, even after she became engaged and was busy with not only her new fiancé, but with the first stages of her career in music now that she had become an adult.

Varda was glad that she was able to once again listen to her friend's lovely music, as well as attend her first gala. The ballroom was filled with hundreds of spectators, dressed in the finest gowns and in tailored suits. Because it was the Summer Gala, many clothes were in shades of green, or had some type of floral pattern, and most people wore greenery or flowers as well, whether in their hair, or pinned to their breasts, or around their wrists or necks or waists.

Varda wore one of the gowns Griff had given her, a lovely rose pink velvet gown embroidered with swirling vines and leaves in a deep green thread. After unloading the two cargo containers that afternoon, as well as

the smaller containers that he had placed in the cabin, she had found among them a smaller trunk, labeled with her name, with about a dozen gowns, with matching accessories and shoes and jewelry. They fit beautifully, which didn't surprise her, for she was fairly average in height and weight, and a wide range of garments often fit her. Embarrassed a little at the gift, she had decided she would definitely have to make Griff more things to wear. He was not a standard size, towering over other men, and with his wide shoulders and thicker neck and limbs, it was no wonder he had not found anything that would properly fit him. Only yesterday he had told her that when the most durable elastane garments no longer fit—as he grew ever bigger—he had tried to sew his own, and had failed miserably at making anything that fit right or looked right, and had given up, for he found he hadn't cared anymore, for none would see him anyway, and if they did, all they would notice would be his beastly face and hands. When he had seen the look on her face, he had assured her that he was pleased with the two outfits she had made him, which looked right and fit right, and were comfortable as well. He had asked her if she would make him a few more, and she had resolved right then that she would make at least twelve more. And now she upped the number to twenty.

Thinking of him made it hard to concentrate on the music. Her sisters sat beside her, and by the way they were quietly tapping on their data pads, she thought they must not be paying attention either. The three other women who also sat at the circular table—friends of her sisters—were also tapping at their data pads, though not so surreptitiously. They wouldn't be the only ones absorbed in something else. Though many did come to the gala to enjoy the quality entertainment, others came merely to be seen.

Guilt made her focus her attention on the stage and on her friend. Novia had finished an instrumental piece on the piano, a familiar melody, and segued into a more upbeat piece, her voice joining the musical notes perfectly and effortlessly. After a short round of applause, she picked up a brass saxophone, and even more upbeat music filled the air as she danced around the stage as the music filled her. This was followed by music from the flute Varda knew Novia's parents had given her on her sixteen birthday: made of solid platinum, it replaced the silver-plated brass one Novia had used for years. Another piano instrumental followed, with a flurry of quick, sharp notes, and then a piece on a trumpet that made her

think of a battlefield where a victory had just been won, which made her clap, and a piece on a violin that made her think of a rain-drenched funeral, which made her weep. A more cheerful tune on a clarinet helped to dry her tears; and a final musical composition on the piano—an old classic tune—warmed her heart. And all the while she knew that this performance was being broadcast live to others in Medii and Peary and Thule, as well as being recorded in aud, vid, and holo-vid formats.

When the last sounds faded from the room, Varda joined the rest in a standing ovation, wiping away the fresh tears from her eyes. Her friend's performance had been a rousing success, and Varda had never doubted, but that wasn't why she was crying. It was the smile that refused to go away from Novia's face that made Varda cry with happiness. She still remembered the unhappy child from years before, and that child was gone now. Surely something similar could happen for Griff. Even as she thought of that she knew it was not the same. Griff had suffered far more deeply than a child cowed by parents who had become overbearing.

The music had started again, echoing around Varda, jolting her thoughts away from the beast, and so she watched as Novia gave them one encore song in response, her voice belting out the notes with ease as she played the piano. After some more even louder applause, Novia accepted a bouquet of tropical grasses, and walked over to join her husband and parents at their table.

Robot servers came out, laden with trays of fancy food. There were seven courses in all, and the buzz of conversation now filled the air. Abandoning their data pads at last, her sisters had become engaged in a lively conversation with the other three women at the table, who were also sisters. She did not know them, and they did not talk to her as they were busy, so Varda instead swept her eyes over the people around them.

Few were familiar to her. There were more relatives of the Mill family, as well as relatives of Tycho, the Reed family, who were now also Novia's family. The Rock family, prominent leaders on the Moon, and the Wood family, prominent leaders on Earth, sat at the best tables, closest to the stage. A number of garishly dressed men and women were at the other prominent tables, and the loud and excited conversation her sisters were having revealed to Varda that they were famous actors and actresses. The rest were probably the usual rich contingent of visitors from Earth and

colonists from the Moon. Less wealthy—but still influential—people would be on the outskirts of the rotunda, farthest away from the stage.

Movement out of the corner of her eye drew Varda's gaze back toward the stage. And she was not the only one who was staring. Others had paused, and quiet seemed to descend on the crowd.

A tall, slender woman was walking back to her table at the edge of the stage. Her elegant dress fit her to perfection. The design was that of a white iris that had burst from the snow. A green column ran from ankles to waist. White velvet fabric flared out over her feet, and twinkled with crystals or diamonds. The tops of her matching shoes had even more of the shimmering gems. From her waist up were the petals of the iris, which rose up and then pointed down, also done in white velvet, accented with yellow-gold velvet that seemed to point toward her face. Gems adorned the top as well, as clear as melted snowdrops. Her hair was yellow-gold and pulled sleekly back, with even more diamonds pinned to it. Other than a few diamonds arching over her eyebrows her face was unadorned. And she didn't need it: for she was Ceres Snow.

Ceres sat down, head held high, haughtily ignoring the stares as she gracefully ate the food in front of her. Two trim, well-muscled men, who had the palest flaxen hair that Varda had ever seen, sat down to either side of Ceres, and by the lack of plates in front of them, must be bodyguards. Their black eyes scanned the crowd, confirming Varda's guess. The fierce looks on their faces prompted most to turn away, or to observe her with slightly more discretion. Those taking vids and pics returned to their tables. Varda turned away as well.

Her sister Ozara, who had been among the many gaping at Ceres, gripped Varda's arm and pulled her close.

"I think you are just as talented as whoever made that gorgeous gown she's wearing," she said, somewhat smugly.

"Whoever made that dress is very creative," Varda replied. "I wonder who they are?"

Atara turned toward her. "We will know soon enough. You can bet that person will be busy for years to come now. Those vids will be everywhere!" After eating a bite of the fruit tart—it had a pattern of berries arranged in the shape of a flower on its top—she continued. "I'd love a gown by whoever did that dress, but I doubt I would be anywhere near first in line. Even twelfth in line would be a miracle."

“Which is why we are so happy to have you as a sister,” Ozara added, before she grabbed Atara’s arm, pulling her away, probably toward other friends, the dinner now over.

As robot valets removed the tables and pulled some of the chairs to the edge of the ballroom, Varda found a relatively quiet spot and pulled the data pad out of her purse.

Every article written about Ceres seemed to be full of extravagant praise for her beauty and intelligence, which told Varda nothing, and thus were worthless. In the end, a search of genealogy records revealed better details. Ceres Snow was thirty-one years old, and had been born at Thule Base. Her parents were both dead—though Varda did not like Ceres, she still felt a wave of sympathy, for she had not known of that detail. Apparently her father died when Ceres was still a child, and her mother had died only two years previously. Surprisingly, Ceres was also related to Griff, as a third cousin. Otherwise, she had no other family.

Entering Griff into the data pad, Varda found herself looking at the last known pic of him, zooming in close for details. He would have just turned sixteen when it was taken. In it he was walking through an arboretum. His hair was brown, and his eyes were also brown, but more of a golden-brown. He had the typical lanky frame of a teenage boy whose body is growing faster upward than outward. His nose was large and curved even back then, on a slightly asymmetrical face, in which his left eye was slightly higher than the other. She would have said that his looks were ordinary, unremarkable, but for the haunted look in the eyes, the same haunted look Griff often had. Though she had not doubted that he was really Griff Gold, the picture confirmed it, for it was clearly that of the same person, if one looked for the little details, like the uneven eyes.

From its context the image had probably been taken without the knowledge of its subject, and Varda found it hard to turn away from such an intimate look at him, seemingly caught in an unguarded moment. He was still a boy here, newly acquainted with grief, his brothers dead, not even realizing that he would soon be alone, horribly changed. What would Griff look like if his life had been allowed to continue on its natural course? Would this face before her have filled out? Would fat and muscle have softened the sharp angles of his limbs? She thought of his strange proportions, his misshapen arms and legs, and wondered if he even could

be changed back. He had said that yes, it was possible, but did he really know?

More importantly, what would have happened to his heart? Would he have lost his hope so completely if he had only remained … human?

Someone sat down beside her, and Varda nearly jumped. It was Novia. Breathing a sigh of relief, Varda put away the data pad and hugged her friend.

Filis and Giles were there too, as well as Novia's husband Tycho, who Varda knew from tutoring days. It was great to meet them again, and with a surprising ease she was drawn into conversation. When Tycho left to rejoin his parents, Varda asked if they could go somewhere quieter to talk.

Somewhere quieter turned out to be the neighboring garden that surrounded the hotel. The sky simulator was dark overhead, the "stars" just coming out. A secluded corner contained two regolith benches facing each other under two large trees.

"I know this will sound strange, but what do you know about any association between Ceres and the Gold family?" Varda asked as she sat on a bench next to Novia.

Filis frowned, smoothing her pale green satin skirt.

"I believe they are related," she said after a few moments of thought.

"Yes, I know. I mean, were they friends or business partners?"

"Definitely not business partners," said Giles as he leaned forward. "The main connection is that they both own businesses on the Moon. Ceres owns Thule Base, and the Gold family own—or owned—a majority share in both Peary Base and Medii Base. It has created quite a quandary for the other owners. The officials have to wait five more years to declare the mother and son officially dead, at least without the bodies. I understand their will set up a trust to take effect in the case of their death, and after forty years, if the shares still had any value, and undoubtedly they will, they would be divided into three equal shares and sold, with at least part of the proceeds being given to a charity set up for the families of helium-3 miners."

"I believe the two eldest brothers were of an age to know Ceres," Filis said. "When the supposed curse happened—not that I think there ever was one, mind—she was one of the few who stuck by the family. There were those who said the sudden death of her mother was because their family was close to the Golds." At the surprised look on Varda's face, Filis

laughed. “I know; Ceres doesn’t seem like the kind of person to be close to anyone. It was her mother that was close to them. Still, I think Ceres was a warmer person when she was younger, though anything warmer than ice cold is still cold. At any rate, Ceres would never allow anyone to tell her what to do, or who to shun. But after that is when she started to take bodyguards along with her. They always look the same, too: handsome, pale-haired, and black-eyed. It almost makes me wonder if she clones them!”

After they all laughed, Varda spoke, her voice quiet.

“So you never did believe there was a curse?”

“Not really,” Filis answered with a shrug. “The authorities did look into it, of course, especially after both sons died. But all the deaths were from different causes. None of the deaths were exactly natural, I suppose, but in each case every person who died was related, whether personally or professionally, to the Gold family.”

“Though it was statistically significant that so many happened in such a small group,” Giles explained. “After the deaths of the rest of the family in the spaceship explosion—from some kind of accident, a problem with the oxygen system, if I am remembering correctly—they hit a dead end, and the case was simply left open, and if anyone asked a higher-up in law enforcement, all they could say was that it was a coincidence. It was a big scandal for a while, but in the end, nothing nefarious could be proved. Ceres in particular was upset over the lack of any resolution—probably because her own mother had died, not because of the Golds—though there were few others left who cared by then. I think everyone was just glad the curse seemed to be over.”

Varda sat in thought for a moment. What Griff had described hadn’t sounded like an accident. “You don’t think that she had something to do it? Perhaps she was trying to make sure no one suspected her,” she said. “She does have an unpleasant reputation.”

“Yes, for killing professions, not for killing people,” Novia answered. “Even then, most of those who offend her simply grovel for a while, until she forgives them or forgets them, and their lives return to the way they were before.”

“Was there anyone who benefited from the death of the last members of the Gold family?” Varda asked, still confused and perplexed.

“Why are you asking? You did not know the family,” Novia said.

“I was reminded recently of the tragedy,” Varda said, and looked down at her hands, now gripped in her lap. After a quick breath in and out to calm herself, she wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt. “Was there any connection to any type of genetic engineering, perhaps to the illegal type?”

“The Gold family? Not even the legal type,” Giles said. “I suppose Ceres could be involved in something illegal, or she might know someone who is.”

“Would anyone have benefited from their deaths?” Varda asked again. She had to know.

“I can’t really think of anyone who would have. The trust was unbreakable. They would have had to wait decades for a chance to purchase even a third of the shares. Perhaps the Golds had some secret accounts set up that someone else managed to access, and then killed them so that no one else would know of the theft, though I don’t see how that is possible.” Giles paused, and continued. “If you would like, I do have connections in law enforcement. I’ll get some of the records for you. The case is cold, and it shouldn’t matter now who knows any details they held back.”

“Besides, they were never a threat to Ceres,” added Filis. “They never sought to be the center of attention, and that is all Ceres lives for. From what I’ve heard, I think Ceres thought she was above them, thought they were dull and tedious. And they were very traditional and old-fashioned, as well as surprisingly humble. You can’t say that about too many people, especially here. I met them, years and years ago, and I liked them, and was sad to hear of their misfortune. I think you would have liked them as well. I think she only did associate with them because they were family.”

“Maybe she did care for them. They were the only family she had left,” added Novia.

“Does she care for anyone besides herself?” Varda asked, looking over at her friend, who shrugged. It was a rhetorical question. Only Ceres herself could answer that, and Varda wondered if even Ceres knew the answer to that question.

As the conversation changed into other topics, Varda realized that she was not convinced that Ceres was uninvolved. Rationally and logically, Ceres had no real motive, at least no motive anyone could discern. But irrationally and intuitively, Varda felt in her heart that if anyone was capable of murder, it was Ceres Snow.

Chapter 11

During the next three days, Varda did all the research she could into the Gold family tragedy. Public records revealed little except that the authorities had investigated a total of thirty-seven mysterious deaths. Five—four, since Griff was alive—were of the Gold family themselves. The rest had some sort of connection to the Gold family, primarily trusted aides of the family.

Public records also revealed the extent to which the deaths had been investigated. Every single person with even the most trivial connection had been inquired into, at least after the third death. Giles came through on his promise, and the police records revealed something new: at several of the accident scenes had been the genetic material of an unknown woman. Which was unusual and highly suspect: everyone on the Moon—whether they came there as a visitor or colonist, or whether they had been born there—had a genetic scan done, for there was always the chance of accident, and the scans would be instrumental in verifying identity, especially if there was little left of the body.

In any case, the DNA was not from Ceres—nor was it from anyone else known to be on the Moon. No genetic manipulation could change a person on that level. Griff, though he had been extensively altered, had still been recognized by the genetic and biometric scanners at his base for who he was. His fundamental human self had not changed, despite the addition of animal gene sequences.

It was only then that Varda truly realized how formidable Griff’s enemy was. There weren’t too many ways for someone to come to the Moon undetected, as most people came via the space elevators. In order to come to the Moon without anyone knowing about it, one would need their own rocket ship, with engines powerful enough to escape Earth’s gravity well. And where would they go besides the three bases? Perhaps the Golds weren’t the only family with a base on the Moon.

Another search of the public records revealed no other bases. There were a large number of mostly unmanned outposts scattered across the Moon capable of sustaining human life, which could be used as a refuge during an emergency, but they seemed unlikely, as even they were visited occasionally, and surely someone living there would be discovered. The

Gold's base was in the records as well, but it was listed as being abandoned.

Perhaps she was hiding in a secret base on the Moon. Or perhaps she was back on Earth, able to blend in with the billions of other human beings. Or perhaps there was some solution that Varda had not thought of yet. Either way, it seemed impossible to find her. Griff's reluctance to talk about her seemed understandable, if she was so powerful.

It was all Varda could think about during the next few days. She sewed in an attempt to forget, but it was hard, and she found it difficult to sleep. Memories bombarded her: the way he had relaxed with her, the way he had spoken of his family. Surely he had not lost all hope?

During the long ride back to Gold base, she thought much about what to say to him, and the time seemed to last forever.

He was there, just inside the base. She almost didn't see him, for his brown clothing blended with the tree trunks behind him.

"I did not mean to scare you," he said, his voice apologetic.

"It's not your fault," she replied, upset at her own behavior, especially when she was trying to befriend him. "I've just got a lot on my mind. It is very hard to concentrate."

"Perhaps a quick meal?" he suggested, gesturing down the path. "We could talk about it."

Pleased, she nodded, and followed him. She wasn't really hungry, but it would be good to talk.

"How was your trip?" he asked.

"Good. There were no problems."

"Were your family pleased?"

"Of course they are. My sisters are over the moon, so to speak, and I don't think they have had a proper night's rest since I came back." Realizing how this sounded, she shook her head in dismay. "I mean, they sleep less, but it is only because they are so happy, if that makes sense."

"What about you?" he asked, and when she looked at him, he gestured at her face. "Your eyes seem very tired."

"Is that a nice way to say that I look like I've been through hell?" She had to suppress a laugh.

"I wouldn't put it that way," he said, a slightly offended note in his voice.

It took a moment for Varda to realize that she had shrunk back in fear. He wasn't really offended, after all. Correcting herself, she leaned forward.

"You look a little tired yourself," she replied. He did look tired. Now that she was closer to him, she could see the hints around his strange face that showed the strain.

He waved at her with a shake of his hand and his head.

"I am well," he said. "I have had a lot on my mind, also. I had trouble with the power station while you were gone, and it took quite a bit of time to fix it."

"Tell me about it," Varda said, smiling.

So he did, and for the next hour she just sat and listened, asking questions when appropriate, nodding when needed, and even laughing.

Frankly, it was boring, and she didn't even understand just what he had done even when she had him explain it in simpler terms. But that was what friends did: they listened to the other person even if they were not interested in what the person was saying, for they were interested in the person.

He had asked for "moments and memories, time and talent." What he had really wanted was a friend. And she was determined to be that friend, to be the best at sharing herself. It was no hardship. At the end of the night she realized just how much she wanted this relationship to work, how much each smile he gave her made her happy.

Chapter 12

The next morning she went for a walk among the roses, enjoying the heady scent being circulated in the air, before she turned to walk the curving paths. A few moments later she saw him ahead of her. He was directing several robots in tree trimming. He wore the newest outfit she had made, a pale grey set.

When he saw her he waved. Stepping up her pace, she moved toward him, keeping her eyes on him. A look of alarm came over his face, and she didn't even have time to wonder why, when she felt a terrible pain in her foot and found herself flying forward.

Her face hit his chest wall with a loud smack. She cried out, and suddenly felt his arms go around her as they both stumbled backward. Righting himself, he gently pulled her up against him.

The cloth against her face was heaving, and she suddenly realized they were both gasping for breath.

"Are … you … well?" he asked as he struggled to control his breathing.

"Yes." A few moments passed, and her breathing slowed. "Thank you."

"You are welcome," he said, and nodded over her shoulder. Turning around, she saw the thick branch on the ground behind her. "You should really watch where you are walking."

"I think I'll remember," she said, turning back. She found that she was looking up at him. He was so very tall, he had to bend his neck down to look at her. She had not really thought about just how tall he really was. His terrible eyes were looking at her. She would not look away. And then he leaned toward her, and his expression changed.

In his eyes she saw … longing?

She stiffened at once, before she even realized she was doing it, and then he seemed to come to himself, and he let go, backing away with unsteady feet, before he turned and fled, so very, very fast, as if a monster was pursuing him. Without the support of his arms, she just barely managed to keep from falling. Dizzy now, she tried to follow where he went, but he was out of sight, the only sound his running feet as they pounded away.

"Wait! Come back! Please, don't go!"

But he did not appear to have heard.

The energy seemed to go out of her, and she collapsed to the ground as she began to shake.

She had wanted to be his friend. She had foolishly forgotten that he was still a male. More than that, still a teenage male, with all the problems that being a teenage male brought.

She had never been held like that before. She had never felt anything romantic toward anyone. She had been so busy, and many of the males her own age had held little appeal. The past year she had not met a single person her own age anyway.

This was a complication, one she should have thought of, one she would have thought of if she hadn't been thinking of him as a beast.

She considered who she could ask for advice. Her sisters had flirted, but their attractions were often fleeting, lasting no longer than a few months. Their engagements to Polux and Pluto—before they had been broken—had been a relief to her father, who had begun to worry that they would never settle down during all those years of short flings that went nowhere. She wasn't sure if they could really help her, even if she dared to tell them.

She certainly couldn't tell her father, and the thought embarrassed her. Her father would try to forbid her to return if he knew. It was probably why he had not told her all those weeks ago what had happened. He was intelligent, and, most importantly, like Griff, he was also male.

She was smart enough to have figured it out; she should have figured it out.

Someone else then, perhaps? Novia might understand, but Varda discarded the idea as soon as she thought of it. She could not tell anyone about Griff, for she could not reveal the secret.

Varda would have to figure this out on her own.

She knew that she had come to like him, even just knowing him for a few days. And he had been incredibly attractive before the change, or at least she thought so when she had looked at his old pictures. And she liked his work ethic. Often those who had grown up in riches thought money was the only thing of value, and from the first time she had met him, he had shown he valued friendship much, much more.

She realized an uncomfortable truth about herself then: that under ordinary circumstances, had she met him during her previously ordinary life, she would undoubtedly feel the same way about him that he was clearly beginning to feel about her. She had dismissed anything she felt

toward him as merely pity or compassion for a man who had suffered greatly. She had allowed her pity and compassion to hide anything deeper beneath them in her heart. Even now, she still wasn't sure what she felt.

Besides, could they even have a life together?

Pulling out the data pad, she researched genetic engineering. She should have researched it long ago.

It was heavy stuff that she found hard to understand at first. She did eventually determine that there were two possibilities: germline and somatic. The first could be done via a parent or parents, to ensure that any offspring had certain characteristics—or lacked certain characteristics—before they were even conceived. The second could be done to someone already born. This was undoubtedly what had been done to Griff.

Further research revealed that somatic genetic engineering did not affect the germline cells. Which meant that any children Griff might have would be unaffected by the changes made to him.

She blushed then, before quickly shutting off the data pad. Perhaps that was more information than she wanted?

Well, it answered one question at least, but there were so many more unanswered.

Nothing about this situation was normal.

What would she do? What should she do?

She had no answer.

* * *

He was gone for hours, and as each hour passed she worried more and more. But he was there at that night's dinner.

"I should not have run," he said as soon as he entered.

"It wasn't your fault," Varda said, in her haste and relief nearly stumbling over her words. "I wasn't careful. If I had been careful—"

"—it would not have happened," Griff added.

"I just forgot—"

"—that inside I am as human as you?"

"Yes," she said, and hung her head in shame. "I am so sorry. You must think less of me."

"You do not need to apologize for that. And I do not think less of you. Anyway, sometimes I want to forget. Either what I am or who I was." He paused, and when he spoke again his words were sad. "You need not worry.

I can see that you do not return my feelings, and you have every right not to. I understand why. It was wrong of me to be upset."

"It is not wrong to have feelings," she said, voice trembling. "I just … when I came here—well, I didn't know what to expect, and I certainly didn't expect you."

"No one could expect me. How could anyone expect me? How could anyone ever conceive of someone being as evil as she was when—" Griff said—his voice having risen with each word—and then he was silent, and a sudden hush filled the air.

After a few moments, in which he seemed to be deep in thought, he turned toward his meal, sat down, and began to eat. She had little choice but to eat as well. How could so many of their conversations over dinner turn into a tale of woe? She wanted to ask him more, but she knew he needed the silence, at least for now, so she said nothing and waited.

When they had finished their meal, he pushed back.

"I am sorry I can tell you so little." His voice was quiet and a little apologetic.

"Why can you tell me so little?"

"I cannot risk anyone else," he said, forcing the words from between gritted teeth.

"You said there were others."

"I cannot speak of them."

"Cannot, or will not?"

"I will not!" His voice was agitated now, and he leaned forward. At the look of surprise on her face, he leaned back and turned away, as if ashamed. "Please, you do not understand."

"Help me understand. There must be some way. Some way to"—she paused, carefully considering what word she wanted to say—"help you. Some way to help those others."

"You are filled with hope. You have seen little of the world. You have not seen what I have seen. You have not faced true evil. You have not lost everything of value. You have not been left with only your own worthless life. You do not have a part of you that wishes for your own death each day, each hour, each minute. You do not hate yourself." Though his words were quiet, they seemed to fill the space around her, as loud as thunder.

"I know I can't understand, but I do understand that you can't give up! You can't lose hope! Love always conquers hate! Good always conquers

evil!” Her voice was pleading.

“Only in fairy tales,” he said, derision dripping from his words. “Perhaps you have read too many. Real life is not like a fairy tale. Real life has no happily ever after.”

“Why not?”

He shook his head in denial.

“Perhaps you have read too few fairy tales,” she said, her own voice firm. “There has to be a way.”

“There is no way!” He banged his fist on the table, his voice louder now, his words harsher. “There has never been a way!” Pacing the room, he stopped at last in front of her. “You do not understand! You are so young, so innocent, so good. Too young, too innocent, too good to understand. Evil is out there. It does not care that you think you can overcome it. It will crush you until your hopes and dreams are gone, and will laugh at you all the while.”

“You cannot be right!”

“I am right. You need to face reality. What is more, I need to face reality. I should never have invited you here,” he said, words bitter. “Here I am calling you a fool, but I am the only one who is foolish.”

He looked at her, his eyes filled with pain. He reached out a hand as if to touch her, though he was too far away to touch her even if he tried. After a moment he let it fall. And then he walked away, his heavy steps echoing, leaving behind him an ill wind.

She opened her mouth to stop him, but nothing came out. It did not matter anyway. He was already gone.

Chapter 13

That night she cried herself to sleep. How could this have happened? Why had this happened?

And to think all she thought she had to worry about was telling him that she did not yet know if she could return his affection.

She was more confused than ever. She cared about him; that she knew. But she had never wanted someone the way she was starting to realize that he wanted her. It was more than just attraction.

That last longing glance he gave her, the hand he reached out.

It was clear that there was at least a part of him still capable of hope, that there was a part of him that wanted to have faith, a part of him that wanted to love. Despite his words to the contrary, she knew he wanted all of that, but had lost too much to believe it was possible.

She could at least offer him friendship. It may not be all he wanted, but it was better than nothing.

The next day he did not appear. She walked in the gardens. She paced through every one of her rooms. And she waited in vain in the dining room, waited until the food had grown cold and the stars were out.

It was no better the next day. She thought of requesting his whereabouts from the computer, but it felt too much like an invasion of privacy, even if he had granted her access. And he owed her nothing.

The morning after that she left, and he was not there to see her off. It was a long flight, and she found no enjoyment even when she tried to sew. Back at Medii she felt lost.

In order to forget, at least for a while, she accepted an invitation to a dinner. It did not help her. Still, she was able to talk to a number of people and discovered someone she thought she could aid, a technician named Metis who spoke of her need for a newer medical scanner. One of the cargo containers that had just been unloaded had something that could fit what they needed, Varda knew, for she had tried to distract herself from Griff by paying closer attention during inventory earlier that day. All that needed to be determined was if it would work. So she invited the girl to go with her to shipping and receiving right then.

It did work. All the parts were there. After a few effusive hugs—and praise that made Varda blush in embarrassment—she was invited to another dinner, and Metis introduced her to several of her colleagues,

including a young man just two years older than she was. Ander was nice, and easy to talk to, but she found it was hard to think of him when her thoughts were only of Griff.

What she really needed was to mend the rift between them. So she headed back toward him the very next day, a day before she had planned.

* * *

Griff did not greet her when she arrived, and she spent the hours that night in her room, too nervous to even sew. Instead she paced back and forth until she was sure she had worn a hole in the rug. Why hadn't he greeted her? Where was he?

The next day, she woke up to find Major waiting for her.

"Follow me," the main server robot said. And so she did.

It led her to the main hangar bay, and directed her to a cabinet against the wall that held a spacesuit her size. Still curious, she put it on. Then the door in the side of one of his lunar flyers opened up. He wore no suit, probably because none fit him.

"I want to show you something," he said.

Varda nodded as she climbed aboard.

He did not use the autopilot during the main part of the flight, instead manually steering the craft, probably because he was not ready to talk to her yet. She was quiet. She would be patient. She was so glad he had at least extended an olive branch of sorts.

After several hours he landed the craft before a small structure. It was an unmanned outpost, small in size, with a hangar that could only hold two large vehicles. The other spot held a vehicle she was sure was used in mining. The living quarters were basic, with no luxuries. A computer bank stood before her. She thought it must be part of some sort of relay station, though she wasn't certain.

"Not long ago I thought as you do," he said at last, sitting down on a stool. "I wanted to stop her. I thought of so many ways in which I could find a way back in, but none of them were possible. And the one way I do know she has undoubtedly blocked, even if I could get back inside the main base.

"The best idea I had was that I could use a helium-3 mining vehicle and enter that way, for she mines like so many others on the Moon. You may have noticed the one that I own, out there in the hangar, identical on the outside to every other one, including hers. But of course it is not quite

identical, because I do not have the correct transponder that can send out the signal to this secret base. Only one that belongs to her has such a thing.

“So I thought perhaps I could capture one. Even if I had to destroy the vehicle, the transponder would probably remain intact. Eventually I found one farther away than the others. So I fired on it from my lunar flyer, disabling the communication array. They fired back, of course, but a lunar flyer is more adept than a vehicle confined to the ground, and I was easily able to stay just out of reach of the bullets. Soon they ran out of ammunition, and I flew closer in order to take out the engine as well. It was then I saw that the overseers had suited up the workers—the slave workers, for that is what they are—and lined them in front of the engine. I could not possibly fire on innocent people. So I left.

“The only good thing about what happened is that she does not know it was me. She undoubtedly thinks it was someone out to steal the cargo, someone who did not quite have the guts to kill. And of course she has changed the way she does things. I doubt I could get away with the same thing again.

“I have a number of unmanned, solar-powered rovers tracking these vehicles, just in case. But it is useless. Each vehicle communicates its location to the main base every few minutes. Another vehicle is no further than a few minutes away. If something happened to one of them, the main base would know about it.”

Speech over, he was silent. He was right that the odds seemed impossible. But seeming to be impossible, and really being impossible … those were two different things. She didn’t think he would listen if she told him that, so she just smiled at him.

On the way back he let autopilot take control, and turned to face her.

“I would like to be your friend. At least until you are finished with the cargo. If that is still amenable to you?”

“Of course it is,” she answered. Daring greatly, she added: “And who can tell what the future may hold? It lies ahead of us, undiscovered, unknowable.”

A smile lit his face, and his golden eyes gleamed in the dark. How could she have ever thought they were the eyes of a demon?

* * *

She soon settled into a routine: three days at Medii Base, one day traveling to Griff’s base, three days with Griff, and then one day traveling

to Medii with two more cargo containers to unload, until the cycle continued.

The time at Medii Base was sometimes spent with her sisters—and later, her father as well, during his few earth-days off between mining duties—or with Novia, but most of the time she spent in her quarters working on the new gowns. She visited the various gardens that could be found around Medii as well, and a new sketchpad she had bought—she preferred paper to the data pad—soon filled up with even more dress designs that her sisters were already clamoring to wear.

Her time with Griff also seemed to fall into a pattern, for he began to spend more time with her. Breakfast together in a gazebo, then working together in the meadow, lunch together in a different gazebo, the afternoon apart working separately, a few hours in the kitchens with the server robots, dinner together in the mansion, and then a few more hours work before the day ended. As the earth-days and earth-weeks passed, she made wonderful progress on the gowns for the Winter Gala, soon finishing them, and she had even started work on her gown for her Twilight Gala. She also surpassed her goal of making Griff twenty outfits, finishing twenty-four of them, and she even embroidered twelve of them with the same geometric leaf and vine motif found throughout his home. In return Griff finished the cabinet with the carved rose design, and it now graced her quarters at Medii.

Occasionally they spent the evening in the main library together, reading to each other, or enjoying holo-vid performances. She learned much more about him as time passed, like how he had disliked chocolate ever since he had eaten an entire tray of it one Christmas eve and was sick all the next day, how he had broken an arm jumping from a tree, and how he had been so proud when he had finished the first wood project that was actually usable and beautiful. She told him how she had always hated the taste of onions, how she had broken a toe on a door, and it had stuck out at an odd angle until a doctor had straightened it with a quick twist, and how happy she was the first time someone who was not her family asked if they could trade silvers for something she had made.

She knew how his fondest memory of his mother was of watching her sew, her tongue sticking out between her teeth as she concentrated, and he knew how her fondest memory of her mother was of watching her work in

the garden, wiping sweat away from her forehead, leaving a smear of dirt almost every time.

It was easy now to look him in the eyes, and she wondered why she had ever found it hard. His strange shape was no longer strange, it was simply him.

The despair she knew he still felt he hid well, though his feelings toward her he could not quite hide.

Varda was divided in two. Half of her heart belonged to her family, but the other half seemed to belong to Griff. As the trips relaying cargo neared their end, a heavy dread filled her. This could not go on forever. Though the trips she was making were still well within acceptable radiation exposure parameters, they would have to eventually come to an end, or at least be far less frequent.

And her sisters had already made plans for their return to Earth as soon as the first balls of the next year were over. By then, their father would also have finished his mining contract, and would join them. After all, Earth had always been their true home. They had only been on the Moon so long because they had no choice. Now they had a choice. Now Varda must make a choice.

Not long ago Griff had told her that the past few months had been more than anything he could have ever deserved, and she had told him she felt the same. He seemed resigned to an eventual farewell, and she knew he must expect to never see her again once the trips were done.

She even knew she would miss him, so much so that she did not want to face it. But she had to face it: they were literally and figuratively from different worlds. She would have to give up one for the other. Her confused feelings toward Griff did not help. Often, she dreamed of him, standing on the other side of a deep chasm. She dreamed that he was not alone: with him were a great host of people crying out for help. And every time in the dreams she leapt across only to fall and awake in a bed soaked with sweat and tears.

She did not expect these days would be easy.

But somehow she did not expect what he would soon ask her.

On the first night back, at the start of the last three days she would spend there before the final cargo trip back to Medii, he walked over to her side at dinner’s end. Confused at first, for he rarely came close, she

watched as he laid a gold rose on the table, a simple gold and platinum ring encircling the stem.

“Varda, will you marry me?” he asked in his gruff voice.

“Oh, Beast, I—I don’t know what to say!” said Varda. She blushed. Whenever she was flustered, she forgot to call him Griff. He had never minded, but she still did.

“I love you, Varda. I think I’ve loved you since even before you came, when your father spoke of your love for roses over gems and gold,” he said, bowing his head.

“How can that be possible?” she asked. Somehow, she was still shaken.

“Does a mother love her unborn child, the child she has longed for, from the moment she knows life has begun?”

“Yes,” she whispered, and turned from him, shaking her head in futile denial. “But that is hardly the same thing.”

“Or is it? The feelings of love, of the best and truest kind of love, are followed by the actions of love, by the devotion to another that only love can create. A mother can say she loves her child, but you know she loves it when she shows her love. You remember that I asked for moments and memories, time and talent? I have always valued these much more than what silvers can buy. We give such in pursuit of what we most value, and if we value rightly, we give such to another person, not to a thing. When I asked for such from you I expected so little. Perhaps a few moments, here and there, just a little bit of your time. And yet you gave so much more, begrudging nothing. But perhaps you only gave out of obligation. Still, I began to love you, and the feelings turned to action, and I knew the love I felt was real, and it grew stronger hour by hour, day by day. For the last few years I have been here alone, and I worked hard because I wanted to forget my loneliness and my pain, so that I would be too tired to even dream, for a dream could only remind me of what I had lost. But for the last few months you have been here with me, and I worked hard because I had purpose, and I began to dream again, and, yes, even to hope again. And love again.”

Griff rose and walked away, resuming his seat at the table. Bowing his head once more, eyes averted—as if her gaze would burn him, or as if his gaze would burn her—he sat for a while in silence.

He sighed. “Do you love me? You can answer no.”

Varda said nothing, her heart beating hard and fast in its cage of bone.

“I know you are capable of great love and great sacrifice,” Griff added.

“You have forgotten there is a secret dividing us. It is a wall between us,” she said at last.

“Walls can be climbed. Walls can be broken.” The voice was sad, resigned.

“Then climb them! Then break them! If you don’t you will live behind them, a prisoner!” Varda cried. “You are the only one who can do it. I would help you if you let me.”

Griff pushed his chair away from the table, stood up, and began pacing. “You know why such a request is impossible. And even if it were possible, I cannot risk her harming you. You are the only one I have left.”

“I would take that risk,” she pleaded.

He was silent as he stopped pacing, facing away.

“I love you,” Varda said, and when she said it she knew it was true, knew that she felt the same way about him as he felt about her. How had she not known it before? Perhaps her love had been like a rose in bud, slowly unfurling as time went on, until at last one looked at it and saw a rose in bloom.

He looked over at her, as if he had just seen the sun rise for the first time in years, and had forgotten how beautiful it was.

“I am not worthy of such a gift,” he said, quietly. “I have always known it.”

“Is anyone worthy?”

“I am not.”

“Then make yourself worthy! Who will face her, if not you? You know of her evil deeds, and yet you do nothing. What about justice for you? You said there are other victims. What about salvation for them? You said before that you would find a way, no matter the cost.”

He was silent for a long time. “I still have not found a way. You know that. And I do not know if I can face her.”

“You will not have to face her alone,” Varda said as she walked over and laid a hand on his arm. “I have thought a lot about them. I care for those people, and I know you care for them as well. How can we ignore them? How can we say we love them, but do nothing? You were just talking about how feelings are proved by action. We must act. Otherwise our love for them means nothing.”

“No matter what you say, it is impossible,” he said. “I would like to think as you do, but I cannot. You have to accept that if you are going to accept me. You have to accept that I can never risk your life.” He bowed, and then he was gone, but Varda could still feel his despair.

She did not expect this to be the way it would end. They could not be together. She had been foolish to even think it was possible.

That night she slept a deep but troubled sleep, and in her dreams Griff was taken away by a great winged creature made from fire and ashes, until he disappeared over the horizon and out of sight.

She awoke in the dark to a strange sound, and it was a moment before she realized what it was. The data pad was buzzing loudly. It was the emergency alarm.

Feeling suddenly uneasy, she picked it up and pressed a hand to its surface. The message was short: *Father is hurt and may die. Come at once. –Atara and Ozara.*

It seemed like several minutes passed before her heart started beating again, but it must have been only moments. And then she ran to the washroom, nightgown streaming behind her, taking only a second to grab the clothing from the day before, already cleaned and pressed.

In less than a minute she was done, and in a few minutes more she was out the front door, and several minutes later she was through the door of the hangar. It was only then that she thought of Griff, but then she saw him, making the final check on the newly-loaded cargo containers. Belatedly it came to her that the sky simulator had been dark, for it was not yet dawn. His face looked troubled, as if he was surrounded by so many shadows, as if he was in the dark, hoping for light, any light to show him the way. Guilt filled her at the sight. She wondered if he had slept at all.

He looked at her, a question in his strange bright and dark eyes. In answer, she gave him the data pad, for she found that she could not speak past the lump in her throat.

“You must go. You must go now,” he said, as he handed it back. He reached into his coat and pulled out a long wooden object, and he held it out to her, cradled carefully between his hands like an offering, much like when she had offered back the golden rose all those months ago. This too was a rose, a carved rose, with a thick stem. The detail was exquisite, and it even had thorns. She picked it up with trembling fingers, and then stared

at him for a moment. He glanced away, tightly closing his eyes, as if he did not want to watch her leave and wanted to keep his last sight of her the look on her face when she took his gift, or as if he was hiding tears that were threatening to fall.

He walked away, and the doors leading to the main dome shut behind him with a final click before she even opened her mouth to thank him.

With a troubled heart she departed, flying out of the hangar and back toward Medii Base, back toward her father. It was only when she was halfway home that she realized she had not even said goodbye. Tears burst from her eyes then, the tears of fear and love that she had kept inside, fear and love for both her father and for Griff.

Chapter 14

The bright lights of the medical center revealed every bruise and scrape on Xenos' exposed skin as he lay, silent and still, on the diagnostic bed. Atara and Ozara sat to his left, clutching each other close; Varda sat to his right, hands clenched together.

They sat there as time passed, and every once in a while one of them would reach out a hand to stroke Xenos' brow or leg. There wasn't much of him they could touch. Both of his arms, wrists, and hands had multiple fractures, but they were nothing compared to the fractures of the ribs and sternum, which had led to myocardial and pulmonary contusions, or so they had been told. Either one of those injuries to the heart and lungs could be fatal, but the latest medical scans had revealed the contusions were not as deadly as doctors had feared. The three girls had wept with joy at the news, and had stayed in a circle of comfort for a long while, arms around each other, grief still fresh and mixed with relief. And now they kept vigil at his side as he slept, watching over him, listening for every quiet breath and every beep of the monitor as his heart beat on, as if it was daring death to come and take him.

Days passed, and Xenos fell in and out of consciousness. Doctors and other medical personnel came in and out of the room as his three daughters watched and waited. A steady stream of visitors came as well, bringing well-wishes and plants.

On the day after the accident, Varda's sisters spoke to each other and to Varda, and by that night Varda realized they had not mentioned their usual topics of conversation, of gossip and gowns and gems and galas.

It was the third day that Xenos finally spoke more than a few words.

"My daughters," he said, his eyes moving from face to face to face, his own face stiff, as if it was remembering the pain.

"We're so sorry, father," Atara said, as tears began to flow down her cheeks.

"This is our fault," Ozara added, as she began to cry as well.

"How could this be your fault?" he asked. His voice was quiet and careful, with pauses between each word.

"We wanted our old lives back so much, we never really thought of the cost to you," Ozara said.

Atara nodded as she wiped away her tears. “We never wanted to think of the cost to you. We both knew it was dangerous, and we ignored the danger.”

“Varda saw the danger,” Ozara said, sighing and shaking her head.

“And then she went out herself to find the missing cargo, and spent all that time bringing it back,” Atara said, and she turned to stare at Varda. “You never did tell us how you found it, when father was unable to.”

Varda sat for a moment in silence.

“It is not my story to tell,” Xenos said, as he too looked at Varda.

“It is not my story to tell, either,” Varda said. “However, the one whose story it is told me I could reveal it if necessary, but only to my family and closest friends.”

Varda nodded at her father, and the twins stared in astonishment as she told the tale of a stolen rose, a secret base, and a genetically-engineered man hiding from a monster. When the story was finished at last, Varda’s sisters began to weep again, and she held them close, their father’s eyes watching them all the while. They asked no questions of her, and promised to remain silent, and Varda knew that they would keep the secret.

As the weeks passed, Xenos’ heart and lungs and bones began to mend, and they left the medical center for their own quarters. The three took turns watching over him, and walked with him in the gardens as he regained his strength. He would not need to finish his time as a helium-3 miner now, and had been released from his contract. He was happier than he had been in years, Varda saw, and joy filled her own heart. The twins still went to the same galas they usually attended, but they also spent a lot of time with their family instead.

And so, as Xenos’ body began to heal, all their hearts began to heal as well from the lingering shame and blame that had hung on in the wake of Sanna’s death all those years ago, depriving Xenos of a wife and his daughters of a mother. Every word they spoke to each other and each moment they shared together helped to ease the secret sadness they had rarely acknowledged in the past, even to each other. Varda began to sew again, and her sisters joined her in working, using their own talents and their own hands to make and to do things, instead of always relying on others to finish the work. When Xenos healed enough, he joined them as well, and he soon finished a variety of small projects that had been abandoned during his time mining. There was only one impediment to

Varda’s happiness: her memory of Griff, alone again on the far side of the Moon.

She had sent him messages during the weeks since she had returned, and he would always promptly answer her, even if those answers seemed subdued. And then one day an answer never came, though she waited. Worry filled her, weighing her heart until it was heavier than a stone. When the third day passed without a word, she asked her father early the next morning if she could speak to him, alone. He frowned at her—concern in every line of his face, for she rarely asked for such a thing—and then nodded, and she joined him in his workshop. She told him then what she had kept secret: that Griff had asked for her hand in marriage, and that she had told him he must confront the one who had cursed him.

“Are you asking my permission to marry him?” Xenos said.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“You have it.”

“You have no objection?” Varda said, surprise in her voice.

“He is still a man, no matter how he looks. From what you have said, he would reveal his existence if he weren’t afraid of this woman. If he did reveal himself, surely someone could find a way to change him back, if it is possible. If not, it is certainly not an insurmountable problem.”

“I know. But I fear something has happened,” she said, pain and confusion in her voice. “He was so sad when I left. Perhaps I should not have said what I did. It is his life, his decision. It is not my place to tell him what to do.”

“But it is your place to choose who you want to marry, and what you will accept in that person,” he said. “What you are really asking me is if you can go back to him. Of course you can. I am nearly healed by now.”

Hesitant, Varda nervously swayed from foot to foot.

He smiled then, and placed a hand on her shoulder. She stilled at the touch.

“You know you must go. It does not mean you are abandoning me. In just over a month you will be an adult, and no longer a child. Part of being an adult can mean making a new family with another, if you so choose. We are still family. It just means our relationship has changed.”

“But I may never see you again,” she said through the lump in her throat.

Reaching forward, he pulled her into a tight embrace, and she buried her face against his chest as though she were still a child, and he stroked her hair as he had done years before when she had last gone to him for comfort.

“I am not dead, yet. I would gladly return to the Moon, even if only to see you. And we can always send messages.”

“Thank you,” she said, and kissed his cheek. He held her close for several more minutes, and then released her at last.

As she boarded the flyer, her heart grew lighter. And the higher she soared above the Moon, the lighter she felt, as if all her worries had fallen away, drawn far from her by the gravity of hope. Surely he was still there. Surely it was a mistake. She remembered the warmth in his strange golden eyes. Had she really found him horrible to look at? And now she couldn’t wait to see him again. She loved him. Why had she not realized just how much she loved him? How had the choice been so hard? They would find a way to save those people.

Hours and hours later, when she landed in the main hangar at Griff’s base, her heart sank and grew heavy. It was dim, nearly dark inside. Only the emergency lights were on.

When she saw the sky simulator had been turned off in the main dome, Varda began to weep in fear. Connecting her data pad remotely to the main computer, she searched for his presence on the base. The computer revealed that he was gone, having departed from the secondary hangar twelve earth-days ago, destination unknown.

There was no small personal transport vehicle or personal server robot to greet her at the door, so she picked up her steps, hurrying across the dome toward the other hangar. She could not run quickly in the near dark, and had to keep to the main paths. Just a few more of the emergency lights lit as she passed them. The castle at the center of the dome hid in the shadows that were all around her now. Tears were flowing down her cheeks and she did not bother to brush them away.

In the secondary hangar she found that he had taken one of the three private spaceships there, instead of the lunar flyer. Had he gone to Earth? Obviously not. It made no sense. Then she noticed that one of the ship’s four lunar rovers was missing. Or had Griff gone somewhere on the Moon? It was more likely, as the one he sought was on the Moon, somewhere. If

he had gone there, why not just take one of the lunar flyers? Lunar flyers were also equipped to carry rovers.

The only thing that made any sense, now that she thought about it, was the presence of the returned ship, which had undoubtedly been flown back via autopilot. If he had gone to face the unknown woman, he might not have wanted her to find where he had been hiding, and the best way to do that would be to make sure she had no way to access his flight logs. There was also another reason that made Varda shudder. Without the spaceship, there was no going back for Griff once he got there. The rover had limited transportation capabilities and limited resources. Perhaps he could live in one for a month, even two if necessary, but no more than that. He would certainly not be able to return to his home.

She sat at the computer console of the ship and tried to access the flight logs, tried to find where he had gone. When access was denied, she remembered that Griff had given her full authority and full control on his base, and that it should extend to the ships. Almost giddy with relief at the thought, she pressed her hand to the genetic and biometric scanner, and was delighted when the ship recognized who she was. Delight changed to distress when she realized the engines had started. Running to first one door, and then the second door, she pulled on the handles. They were locked. As the autopilot engaged and the ship began to leave the hangar, she realized what had happened. Some sort of emergency protocol had been triggered. She tried in vain to override it, but her efforts were useless, and she banged her fists against the primary flight display in frustration and anger. The ship was only allowing her to access minor functions. She searched for what she could, and discovered that at least the spaceship had been fully refueled, as well as fully restocked. The ship could make it all the way to Earth.

Helpless and hopeless, she could only watch out the viewscreens as she left Griff’s base. The ship was much faster than the lunar flyer had been, and soon horror filled her when she realized that the craft was headed toward Earth. She watched out of the rear viewscreen as the Moon grew ever smaller, and then she watched out of the front viewscreen as the Earth grew ever bigger. When she was about halfway between the two celestial bodies the computer seemed to come to life, and then she heard his voice from the speakers in the cabin. It was only an aud recording, not a vid, so there was no visual on the screen.

“My dearest Varda,” said Griff’s disembodied voice. “I did not tell you, but I received a radio transmission after you left. If you are listening to this, you have come looking for me. By now, I have either infiltrated her base or my plan has failed. I cannot risk her finding you, and so, as you already know by now, I put this ship into emergency mode. You are headed toward the same place on Earth that my parents built years ago. I do not know the exact location, so even if I am captured and tortured I cannot reveal it. You will be safe there. In case a safe place cannot be found there I have programmed this shuttle to cede control back to you once you land on Earth. There is enough fuel for a trip to any nearby port or city you wish. I am sorry it had to be this way. I love you too much to risk you coming after me. I have gone east of the Sun and west of the Moon, and one can never find their way to such a place, at least without a miracle. And if by some miracle you love me, it would be more than enough. I would die happy knowing you love me. Farewell, my dearest Varda.”

The last words grew ever quieter, until it seemed like they had died. Varda, tired and exhausted—in both body and soul—slumped down in her chair and promptly passed out. She awoke to find herself back on Earth. The chronometer revealed that it was midnight, local time. Trembling and shaking, Varda walked over to the closest door. As Griff had promised, it opened. Though the icy wind chilled her, she looked around at the landscape—the spaceship had landed in the center of a snowy meadow—and then up at the sky. The Moon was no longer gray or white, but was the color of dried blood. It was a lunar eclipse—sometimes also called a “dead moon” or “blood moon”—for the Moon had fallen into the shadow of the Earth. Lunar eclipses were the only time that the peaks of eternal light were in darkness.

Varda threw her head back and wept at the sight. The tears she shed—tears that turned as cold as diamonds—froze on her cheeks and then blew away, and perhaps only the Moon saw where they fell.

PART 2:
Craters of Eternal Night

Chapter 15

Sunrise burst over Earth's horizon, filling the land with molten color. Sunlight gleamed on the snow, turning it to shades of white and gold and rose. Varda's tears had long since dried. She had even slept in one of the bunks, and there had been no nightmares to haunt her. Perhaps that was only because her soul had been too weary to dream.

Outside the spaceship she saw she was in a meadow in the middle of a bowl-shaped valley, surrounded by high peaks. Trees encircled her, pines and firs heavy with snow on needles, maples and birches heavy with ice on bare limbs. No cabins or trails or any sign of life was to be seen.

She remembered then her first glimpse of the entrance into Griff's base on the Moon.

She looked more closely, and saw it: another light beyond a break in some trees.

Extending the wheels, she slowly drove the craft toward the light. There was a meandering path, wide enough for her spaceship to drive between the trees. Varda blinked at the sudden shimmer she saw ahead of her, and she found herself looking at an immense arch that led to an underground hangar. It was holo-vid technology, used cleverly to disguise the entrance.

Either someone was allowing her in, or the secret base here had recognized the identity of her ship, triggering an automated, computerized system.

Driving inside, she found much the same as what she had found on the Moon, though without the airlocks. Descending from the spacecraft, she walked forward and opened a carved wooden door identical to the ones on the Moon.

The central dome beyond was smaller, perhaps only three hundred yards wide, though still substantial. It was as if she had stepped from winter into summer. A small stone cottage was at its center, surrounded by leafy green trees and plants. The ceiling had the same sky simulation technology, which seemed strange, as she had only just been under the real sky.

An uneasy feeling filled her, and she swept her eyes back and forth, trying to place what had so unnerved her. It was more than the change in seasons. The place was too well-kept, the gardens obviously cultivated. Automated systems could keep the plants alive, but only a human keeper could show this level of care.

She walked, her footsteps making little sound on the grass beneath them. A wooden archway led her inward, casting long, dark shadows. At the end was a garden. At its center were golden roses.

She gasped, running forward until she stood before them. Her eyes had not deceived her.

A soft sound behind her made her turn, and she uttered a frightened and shocked cry.

Someone stood in the shadows.

“Who are you?” It was a woman’s voice.

Varda did not answer. Was this the woman who had murdered Griff’s parents and brothers? Did she also find this place as well, somehow? It made no sense.

“The computer here recognized your spaceship. It has informed me that you have been given access to it. Only a member of the Gold family can grant such a privilege.”

Varda remained silent, staring at the weapon she now saw in the woman’s hand.

“Your face is unknown to me. You will tell me who you are, and how you were given access to that ship, or I may be forced to use this,” the lady said.

“Only if you tell me who you are,” Varda replied, her fear having been replaced by anger.

The shadowy figure walked into the light, and Varda’s anger turned to astonishment.

White streaks graced the golden-brown hair of the woman before her. She was no longer young, with worry lines around her dark eyes, but she was still lovely. A white dress fell from her shoulders to her ankles, and her wide white belt had been decorated with intricate goldwork in the shapes of stars and suns. The largest star moonstone Varda had ever seen was suspended from a thick gold chain that encircled her neck. But it was the face Varda knew, though she had only seen it in pics and vids.

“You’re alive,” Varda whispered.

“Yes, despite a very good effort to ensure my death, I am alive,” Astra Gold answered. “And now you will tell me who you are.”

Varda nodded, and moistened her dry lips.

“My name is Varda Gray. Your son Griff gave me access to his ships and his base.”

“Griff is alive?” The voice was filled with scorn. “I do not believe you.” Varda watched as Astra tightened her grip on the weapon.

“He was alive, at least he was the last time I saw him, several months ago.”

“Describe him,” Astra said, coldly.

“He has gold and black eyes, with golden brown fur on his body and multi-colored hair on his head. He has thick lower limbs and heavy paw-like hands and feet with claws.”

Astra lowered the hand that held the stunner, but only slightly. “You have no proof of what you say. How can I believe you? How do I know that she did not send you?”

Varda lowered the bag she carried to the ground, slowly pulling out the data pad. With a few taps of her finger, she remotely accessed the message, and the sound of Griff’s voice filled the air once again.

Astra cried out at the sound, in a tone halfway between sorrow and joy, dropping the weapon. At the end she rushed forward, and pulled Varda close. Varda joined her in weeping.

“You love my son,” she stated, when the emotions had at last settled down, her voice as soft as snow falling to the earth.

“Yes,” Varda said, as she followed Astra to a nearby wrought-iron bench, where they both sat, facing each other, hands gripped together.

“And he loves you.”

“Yes.”

“How can this be?”

And so Varda told the story again, leaving nothing out, telling her everything.

“I have no way to help him now,” Varda said at the end of her tale. “I do not know where he has gone, or even who he is facing.”

“I do,” Astra said. Overcome with emotion, Astra closed her eyes, and Varda waited for her to continue. “For two years I have believed I was alone in the universe, my family dead. And now you have given my son back to me,” she said.

“Is he even still alive?” Varda asked. “I do not know.”

“She needs him to be alive. And she needs to change him back. That will take time. If she has caught him, that will be the first thing she will do.”

“What did she want him for? And who is she?”

“She wanted Griff to marry her. She had failed to marry his brothers, and he was her last chance if she wanted to get her hands on the Gold fortune, as well as our controlling share in both Medii and Peary. Ceres Snow does not take no for an answer.”

“But, I saw the official report. It was someone else,” Varda said, surprise in her voice.

“I am sure she arranged it somehow. She would not dirty her own hands with blood.”

“How did you even find out who it was?”

“I did not know, for the longest time. I never suspected her. When Ceres took a special interest in him I thought it was only because they were cousins, and after all the mysterious deaths, he needed a friend. I saw no harm, for she was family. He never seemed entirely comfortable around her, though I never knew exactly why. But he did tell me that she was so cold, so vain, so obsessed with herself, and that he had absolutely nothing in common with her. She came to him one day when he was sixteen, after the death of her mother, whom she undoubtedly murdered herself. She was crying that she was all alone now, that the same person who had killed his brothers and friends had killed her mother.

“Though it struck him as odd for her to show such emotion, he embraced her in an effort to comfort her, and then she tried to kiss him. Revolted, he pulled away. It was then he told her that he could never be interested in her, that he thought of her only as a cousin. She seemed to take it well, saying that perhaps he would soon love her the way she loved him, but that was when Griff began to suspect that she was behind the murders. Without telling anyone, he sought to prove her guilt by tracking everywhere she had been, everyone she had talked to. And then he found something at Thule Base, something terrible she was hiding, and her men caught him.

“He awoke to find he had been operated on, a fresh wound on his chest. She told him the truth then. How first one, then both of his older brothers had spurned her, and that she had had them killed. How she had set her sights on him from an early age, hoping to mold him from the beginning. How she had killed the others so that people would be hesitant to become close to our family, in order to deprive him of any friends or the possibility of a spouse, so that he would turn to her. And how she had done to him far worse than what she had done to the people she enslaved. She

told him of the device attached to his heart, a device only she could remove without killing him, a device that would change him into a monster. She set him free then, not that he would ever be free of her after that. She was confident he would be back once he began to change, that he would beg to marry her, beg to be returned to his human self. That was the only reason she changed him, you see. She was sure that he would come to her after that. She could not conceive that he would choose a life as a beast over marrying her. Meanwhile, to ensure his silence, she had a boy his own age killed in front of him, and told him that she would kill hundreds more if he went to the authorities and revealed the secret he had uncovered."

"What was her secret?" Varda asked, horrified, though she was sure she already had guessed.

"Thule Base is a normal base, like all the rest. But there is another one—near it, or attached to it—where thousands have been kept captive for decades."

"Why? How?"

"Ceres told Griff that many years previously her great-grandfather Janus had experimented with illegal genetic engineering, some form of advanced gene therapy, using people from the poorest sectors. The first and second experiments were failures, resulting in deformed creatures that died within months. The third experiment was either a failure or a success, depending on how you look at it, resulting in creatures much like Griff, creatures that lived, but that no longer looked quite human. The fourth experiment was a success, resulting in humans that looked normal, but weren't. The animal traits were now on the inside. Both the third and fourth experiments gave the test subjects increased strength and stamina, and they needed little sleep."

"For what purpose did he do this?"

"He was then the owner of Thule Base, having bought it years and years ago from the Wind siblings. But he wanted more than just the revenue from water ice. He wanted to be self-sustaining, eventually, but there is no way to gather solar power in the craters there. Janus needed helium-3 for the fusion reactor he planned to build to give him that power. These genetic experiments gave him the perfect workers. He recruited them from Earth, offering them lucrative jobs as colonists, choosing only the most desperate and the ones who would not be missed. He put them in some kind of stasis, and smuggled them in cargo containers. When they woke,

they found they were stronger than before, and that they were prisoners. He also attached a second device to their brainstems, a device that would kill them if they fled from the confines of his base.

“Over the years he has brought more and more people there, increasing their numbers. He persuaded some of his more venal captives to join him in enslaving the rest, in exchange for better treatment for them, presumably. When Janus saw that Ceres had his same cold heart, even as a girl of only twelve, he made her his heir and revealed his secret, which he had never revealed to Ceres’ parents, who only knew about the legitimate side of Thule. And then he died, for he was very old by then, and Ceres took his place.”

“Those were the people Griff wanted to save,” Varda said, her voice low.

“Those are the people we must save,” Astra said. “We must rescue them all, as well as Griff. I hadn’t thought it possible, but we need to find a way, somehow.”

“How can we even find this hidden base? Did Griff tell you where it was?”

“No. He kept the secret. After he began to change, he hid in his quarters, refusing to speak to us or to let us see him. Finally his father and I found out most of the truth of what had happened, though he refused to tell us exactly where the base was. We persuaded him to flee, until we could figure out something to do. And then you know most of what happened. I pushed him into the escape module, after which I passed out for what must have been only a few moments. When I came to I entered another module myself, only just getting away before the second explosion hit. Then I saw a wrecked module out in space that I assumed was his.”

“So we can do nothing.” Frustration filled Varda’s voice.

“Someone with the right kind of skills may be able to break into the ship’s flight logs,” Astra said.

“My father might know how to do that. And then we can follow the rover’s tracks, if Ceres hasn’t found them and obscured them.” Now hope filled Varda’s voice.

“There is another possibility. Many years ago the Wind family originally owned Thule. They designed and built it themselves. Perhaps they know something that can help us.”

Her words blew away the last shred of fear from Varda’s heart, leaving only the hope.

Chapter 16

Fearing discovery by Ceres if they used the talk net—Ceres' power extended far—the two set out before noon on Astra's own ship for the first of the Wind siblings, for a meeting face to face. The journey was long, for Eurus Wind lived in the southern hemisphere, and they arrived just in time to see the sun rise in the east. A gentle breeze stirred the air as the two disembarked, a soft rain fell, and the weather was as warm as spring.

Eurus, along with his wife, Zriha, greeted them. The two were well over one hundred years old. Despite this, they still strongly resembled the vids she had seen, though Eurus' golden hair was now mostly white, and Zriha's hair was mostly gold, with streaks of gray. Though only distantly related—Astra's mother had married the son of his fourth cousin—they knew who she was at once, and they greeted her with outstretched arms, clearly overcome, and it was a while before Varda and Astra could get a word in.

Sometime later, over a breakfast of fresh fruit, Varda and Astra told their story.

"I always had a bad feeling about Janus," Zriha said, nodding and then shaking her head.

"He was very secretive. But he was the only one with enough silvers to purchase the base," Eurus added. "My brother and sisters and I all missed Earth, and so we took his offer. And it was the only offer."

"Can you help us?" Varda asked, leaning forward and touching his hand lightly with the tips of her fingers.

Eurus nodded slowly. "I will reveal something that not even my wife knows," he said, and Zriha shook her head, the skin around her eyes crinkling in mirth. After smiling fondly back, Eurus went over to a bookcase, pulling down a framed vidpic, which he handed to Varda. In it were four people—two women and two men—dressed in vintage white and black and gray spacesuits, standing on the surface of the moon, jauntily posing. She hovered a finger over each person and names appeared on the screen: Eurus, Zefir, Notus, and Borea.

"The four of us, when we built the base, built another way in. It was our secret, a secret we never revealed to Janus when he purchased it. Do you see the three medallions on our belts?"

Varda zoomed in on the image; Astra, who sat beside her, leaned in close to see as well. The three round medallions were each approximately three inches in diameter and were intricately made of silver and gold.

“They are the symbols for Thule Base,” Astra answered. “Everyone who lives on the Moon knows them.”

“I have seen Ceres’ bodyguards wearing those belts, those medallions,” Varda said.

“The medallions are really keys,” Eurus said. “You need all three to enter.”

“Do you have these keys?” Varda asked him, excitement in her voice.

“I am afraid I do not,” Eurus answered. “Janus bought everything at the base, from the smallest screw to the largest gear. We never thought we would go back.” At the crestfallen look on Varda’s face, he continued. “Perhaps one of the others brought them back to Earth.”

Zriha stood up. “We must go and visit Zefir. She seems the most likely choice for keeping something she shouldn’t.”

Eurus joined her in standing. “Of course, you are undoubtedly right. And we will go with you.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Varda protested.

“We care about those prisoners too,” Eurus said. “And I feel responsible.”

“If we set out now, we will be at her home by sunset,” Zriha added.

And so they were. In the southern part of the northern hemisphere, where Zefir lived in a small cottage by a lake, it was a dry day in autumn, the leaves painted with golden hues, the land painted with the last light of the sun. Zefir, with her auburn and white hair, was the opposite of her brother in many ways. Where he was gentle and quiet, she was ardent and loud. Where he was stocky and round, she was slender and angular.

Despite those differences, in her heart she was similar to her brother. She too immediately wanted to help. But she had not taken the secret keys with her either, and so the group set out again the following morning, with Zefir and her husband, Ehreb.

By noon, they were in the northern part of the southern hemisphere, at the home of Notus and his wife, Dacey. They lived in a desert, and the air was very hot and dry. Notus did not have the keys either, and with a heavy heart, Varda set out with the group again, now with an additional two people.

At midnight they all arrived at last at the home where Borea lived.

It was the coldest and darkest place on Earth that Varda had ever known. While Astra also lived in the northern part of the northern hemisphere, Borea lived in the polar regions where the earth beneath their feet never warmed. It was a hard place to live, but it was where Borea's husband Njord had been born, and it was a place that Borea had come to love as well.

Sitting around a hot fire, in a home hidden beneath a layer of ice and snow, Varda and Astra told their story for the fourth time. Borea was quiet for a moment, staring at the rug, her white and black hair falling over her face and obscuring part of it from view. Then she stood, picked up a small wooden box from the mantle, and opened it.

"Yes, I did bring a set of keys back, but I lost two of them many, many years ago," she said, holding out one medallion so that all could see it. On it was an image of the stars in the sky above the Earth. "This is the final one, which will unlock the last door." After pressing a tiny, hidden button, the front and back halves sprang apart, revealing the key within. Putting it back together, she placed it on the low, circular table before Varda.

"But without the others, it is hopeless, it is impossible," Varda said, as her head sank onto her hands.

"Not hopeless," Astra said, patting her shoulder. "You only need to get the other two from Ceres."

"But how could I persuade her to give me or sell me these keys?" she asked as she stood up and began to pace, ignoring the pitying looks the others were giving her. "How could I make such a strange request?"

"During our recent travels I've been thinking about what to do," Astra said as she picked up the medallion. "Because we have this one, I believe it will be easier. If you wanted all three of them, she might be suspicious and she might take a better look at them and discover their secret. But if you wanted only two of them, and if you had a reason to want them that she could accept, you might be able to get them. She has several sets, and giving just two of the medallions to you would cost her little."

"You have an idea?" Varda said as she stopped pacing and sat down again.

"Yes," Astra replied with a smile, her eyes gleaming. "But first, we must make you into a shining star."

Chapter 17

With the help of the Wind family, and their numerous descendants, Varda's name was soon on every tongue and in every ear around the globe, blowing all the way to the four corners of the Earth. And with the help of her father and sisters and Novia's family, everyone on the Moon knew of her as well.

Her story captivated both worlds. A girl who lost her mother, a woman who nearly lost her father. A girl who was rich and then poor, a woman who was poor and then rich once more. A girl brave enough to smile when she had nothing, a woman brave enough to laugh at the dangers on the far side of the Moon. Everyone wanted to meet her, to see her, to talk to her. Everyone wanted to be the next person to wear something made by Varda. Everyone wanted to know where she was.

Varda remained in hiding at Astra's home for several earth-weeks. And she worked harder at sewing than she had ever worked before, until her hands and arms and fingers ached, until she was too exhausted even to dream. And she watched the Moon each night, as it went from full moon to waning moon to new moon to waxing moon. And she thought of Griff and of the other prisoners. She feared he was dead, and she feared she would fail. Most of all, she feared what it would do to her heart. Could you get close to someone you hated, to save someone you loved?

It was a question without an answer. All she could do was try, or die trying.

She was playing a dangerous game. Even Ceres had never been spoken about the way the talk net was speaking about her now. Would Ceres ruin her or kill her? In lunar gravity one always needed to walk carefully or they would lose their balance and fall. This was much more dangerous, and if Varda fell she could die, and others might die as well.

On the first day of the last month of the year 4003, Varda returned to the Gold's base with Astra, in the same ship—refueled and restocked by Astra—that had taken her away. Her father met her there, having brought the unfinished gown she planned to wear at her Twilight Gala. She had less than two weeks to finish, less than two weeks to finalize the plans.

She smiled when she saw him descending the flyer. He had regained most of the weight he had lost during his convalescence, and there was color in his cheeks once more.

Once greetings were done, she took his arm as she guided him back inside, the dress slung over her shoulder.

“I have someone I would like for you to meet,” Varda said as they walked inside the mansion and into the library. Astra waited there, dressed in a white and gold gown and the same star moonstone pendant as before.

The color in Xenos’ face turned even pinker. Varda had never seen her father so flustered, so out of sorts. Regaining his composure, he bent over Astra’s hand and kissed it. Varda was surprised to see that Astra was blushing as well.

“I see you have been keeping secrets from me,” he said to Varda, but his eyes were looking at Astra.

“I am afraid we couldn’t tell you before. We don’t know who may be listening to the talk net,” Astra said, answering his question.

“There is more you need to know,” Varda said, setting down the dress, and gesturing for him to sit down. Amused, she watched as he nearly stumbled over a padded footstool, so intent was he at staring at Astra.

As Astra told the story of Griff and his secret, and of Ceres and her secret, Xenos could not take his eyes off her, and Varda had to suppress a laugh. She hoped he was listening to what Astra was saying. She hoped his eyes wouldn’t roll out of his head and land at Astra’s feet.

“Can you help?” Astra asked as she took his hand in hers.

“Of course,” he said.

The blush was back, Varda noticed.

“Finding the coordinates that your son entered on the ship will take some doing, but I think I know a way that will work. I also think I can help with the devices she is using to control those people,” he said, for he had been listening. “I just need to get into the base and find the power supply.”

“But first, we have a plan,” Astra said. “We need those two keys.”

“Yes,” he answered her, a shy smile on his face.

The two didn’t say anything for several very long seconds.

“I am going to finish my dress,” Varda said, and, picking up the garment, she went back to her rooms upstairs, confident she was no longer wanted.

They all worked hard as the day of her gala neared. Varda spent all her time on the gown, first attaching the bodice she had finished while she was at Astra’s to the rest of the garment that her father had brought, then

working on all the little details, the intricate embroidery, the extensive beadwork. At last it was done, and the whole gown shimmered with gems.

Her father unearthed the coordinates from the bowels of the ship's computer, and spent the rest of the time finishing the work neglected since Griff had been captured. Astra joined him, and the two could often be found laughing or talking together as they worked. Varda had not seen him this content in years. The smile he had only given to Sanna was being given to Astra. Varda could not be happier at what had happened. He had been lonely for far too long.

Her sisters—who knew everything now—were busy as well. They rented the same ballroom used in the Summer Gala—used in all the main galas—and rented the nearby garden as well. They arranged for a special shipment of three thousand fresh-cut roses to be sent up at great cost from Earth, as well as the finest foods that only the Earth's land and sea had to offer. Close family and friends as well as influential people had been invited. Additional guests from both the Earth and the Moon were chosen randomly, and those lucky enough to get a spot were envied. It was all anyone on the talk net could speak about. All eyes would be on Varda.

Varda was nervous, and afraid. She had never been one for crowds. She had always been happiest with only her family. And now she would have to draw the attention of the famous and infamous Ceres. Could she even do it? The anticipation that had been stirred up was powerful, but it would be her presence that would send her star into the stratosphere, so she could be seen from the lofty height, far out in space, where Ceres dwelt above all others.

She would need to walk two paths at once. She would have to be charming and beautiful, but not so charming and beautiful that she would be a threat to Ceres. Even now she feared she had already gone too far. Though Ceres had only killed in her pursuit of ultimate wealth and power, Varda was already drawing a lot of attention on the talk net. Her Twilight Gala would be the key.

Chapter 18

On the fourteenth day of the final month of the year, on the day Varda Gray crossed the final threshold between girl and woman, she held her Twilight Gala. Beneath the rotunda of the vast ballroom, on the circular stage above the crowd, she stood, straight and strong, while the vids and holo-vids recorded her every move.

Nearly everyone who had received an invitation was there. It was an unprecedented turnout, and much more than she could have ever dreamed of or wished for. Her sisters and her father—Astra would have to remain in hiding—were there as well. Novia and Tycho and their families—who were still on the Moon—had come, and Polux and Pluto and their parents and the four Wind siblings and their spouses had traveled all the way from Earth. Her family and friends encircled her and surrounded her, and their presence gave her strength.

The roses had been arranged by color in concentric circles: first black around the circumference of the dome, then gray, then white, then green, then pink around the circular stage. She had added three thousand more roses from Griff's garden to the three thousand from the Earth. Moonglass lights and electric candelabras gleamed on the mirrored tabletops, and polished silver and gold place settings and crystal goblets shone in the light. Thick, soft moss carpeted the floor beneath their feet. But it was her dress, made in the shape of a rose, that truly stood out.

The bodice of the dress was the green calyx of the flower; the skirt was the pink petals. Wide and voluminous, it bloomed around her like a full-grown rose in a bell shape, sepals delicately draped over it. The fabric had been carefully dyed in ombré tones. She had embroidered lines and veins and other small details on each part. Tiny gems and beads had been sewn all over—or put in settings and fastened to the dress—mostly pinks and greens to match the color beneath, but also in tones of black and gray and white, to add dimension and depth.

Her sisters had done their part as well. Ozara had made a series of interconnected delicate necklaces and bracelets that twined around her from neck to wrist, with green gems in a variety of shades set in platinum, in a leaf and vine and thorn motif. Atara had misted her gently curled wavy brown hair with just a little color—green, with pink tips where her hair flowed past her waist—and had applied dramatic emerald and black

cosmetics around her eyes and a less dramatic soft shimmering pink blush to her cheeks.

Descending from the stage, Varda wound her way through the tables, smiling and nodding and greeting all those she met. She was surrounded by dozens upon dozens of people she did not even know, who were listening to every word she said, who were watching every move she made, and who were speaking nothing but praise. In the end Varda had decided that she could only be herself, that the ordinary girl who preferred home and hearth and who had been thrust in the spotlight by others would be less threatening to Ceres, while still drawing her attention. And it was the truth. The only untruth would be hiding her knowledge of Ceres' secret, but if Varda succeeded, it would save many, many people from a terrible fate, as well as saving the one she loved.

So Varda talked with all those who sought her, whether rich or poor, and, when the ball was over at midnight, she greeted all those who waited outside for a glimpse of her, and so it wasn't until dawn lit the sky simulator that she at last went back to her quarters, her feet sore, her body exhausted.

The twins and Novia were there, waiting and smiling. After they helped her out of the dress, and after she took a long, very hot shower and changed into more comfortable clothes, she rested on a couch and listened to the three talking for a while.

"Are the two of you reconciled with Polux and Pluto?" Varda asked her sisters when there was finally a break in the conversation longer than a few words could fill.

The two grinned at her, Atara fluffing out her hair and Ozara brushing non-existent dirt off her sleeves.

"Not yet," Atara replied.

"We are letting them worry just a little," Ozara said.

"They did break it off with us, after all."

"We *may* have flirted with a few other guys."

"After all, we are still single!"

"And now they are more interested than ever before!" This was said in a jubilant tone of voice by Ozara.

"They did say we have changed. Polux told me that my thoughts are deeper," Atara said, sighing and rolling her eyes. "I think he meant less shallow, but didn't want to use those words, even if they were true."

“Pluto told me that my words are wiser,” Ozara added. “I think he meant less foolish.”

“But what has really changed it that their mothers both like us now,” Atara said, hands held out, a look of wonder on her face.

“We actually spent most of the time talking with them, if you can believe it.” Ozara said as she walked back and forth before stopping beside her twin. “I never knew Karyl taught algebra, trigonometry, and calculus!”

“And Polux’s mother Karyn can speak three languages!”

“You really didn’t know that?” Varda asked, unable to keep the astonishment out of her voice.

“No, we never really thought such things were important before,” Atara said.

“Unlike you, Varda, we don’t ask people about themselves, though that is definitely going to change. Karyl told me I could even use math in jewelry making!” Ozara started pacing again.

“And it might be fun to learn another language!” Now Atara was pacing.

“You are also twins, just like Karyl and Karyn,” Varda pointed out.

“I know! We really should have been friends with them before now!”

Novia had been silent, searching on her data pad.

“What are you looking for?” Varda asked, moving over to sit by her friend.

“Vids and holo-vids of Varda and her dress are already on the talk net,” she said to all three of them. “I also expressed a wish to be the next person to wear a gown by Varda on my own personal account, and sent it to my followers and fans. By the end of today there will be hundreds more just like it, hundreds more people wishing to be the lucky person you choose.”

The twins came up behind either side of Novia and looked over her shoulders.

“Look at this,” she said, as she flipped through dozens upon dozens of entries. “You are everywhere now. Every major media company, both on the Earth and the Moon, has something to say about you. This one said it was ‘like being in the presence of a creature that can only be found in myths and legends’ and another said you were ‘a celestial flower sent down from heaven, bringing life and beauty to the Moon’—that is a bit overdone—and still another said you were ‘a beautiful rose among roses, a bright star among stars,’ which is very poetic. That one must have researched what your name means.”

“Yes, that is all very lovely, very wonderful, but do they want Varda’s gowns?” Atara leaned even farther over Novia’s shoulder.

After motioning for Atara to give her more than three inches of personal space, Novia flipped past several more screens of news.

“This one says, ‘Who will Varda design for next?’ Another one says, ‘All eyes will be on Varda’s creations during the Winter Gala’ and a third says ‘Who will wear a gown by Varda at the Sun Gala and the Moon Gala?’ There are at least four more just like it,” Novia said as she scanned more stories. “And so many pics and vids as well!”

“It worked!” Ozara said. She was now leaning over Novia’s other shoulder. After a quick look and a frustrated shake of the head from Novia, Ozara backed off as well, muttering a quick apology. “Ceres will surely want to be the one to wear the gowns you make for those two galas. I doubt she will let anyone else near those dresses.”

Novia handed her the data pad. Varda searched the stories, and then played a vid taken of her in the rose dress, recording by the premier media company on the Moon. In it she was speaking to several people who were asking the same questions that nearly everyone else had asked yesterday and early that morning.

“The Winter Gala is in just ten days,” said the newscaster, with her perfect hair and teeth shining in the light. “The Sun Gala is next month, the Moon Gala the month after that. Who will wear a gown by Varda?”

Varda watched her own face in the vid, smiling uncertainly. She listened as she answered the questions. Perhaps Ceres Snow was watching the same vid even now.

“My sisters and I will wear matching gowns at the Winter Gala. I do have designs for the Sun Gala and the Moon Gala, and I will start on them tomorrow. As for who will wear them? I do not know. I have not decided. For I will not sell them for gold or for silvers, but I will sell them for something from the past, in the present, for the future.”

Chapter 19

Varda's eccentric request spread faster than light through both the Earth and Moon talk nets. It was not the first such request of its kind, or even the strangest, especially among the rich, who could normally purchase most anything they wanted. Years and years ago there had been the offer from one woman of three billion silvers to the one who could resurrect her dead child, as well as the offer from one man of four million silvers to the first two people willing to test if stasis could last a hundred years. The first had been an impossible request, and the second had been an illegal request. Most requests were much simpler. People traded for a kiss, for a secret, for the first flower from a garden, for a shuttle trip around the Sun, for a chance to meet someone, for a poem. People had even traded for what she had asked for, for something rare from the past.

By the next morning hundreds of offers had come in. She was offered the boots of the man who had first walked on the Moon. She was offered an ancient coin taken from a ship that had been underwater for three hundred years. She was offered a piece of a meteorite that had crashed to the Earth thirty years before. She was offered a love letter written during the Third World War. She was even offered a lock of hair from the man who had invented artificial gravity four hundred years ago.

Varda remained in seclusion in the days leading up to the Winter Gala, talking only to family and friends, mostly ignoring her talk net account. She spent all of her time working on the gown for the Sun Gala. It would need to be even more magnificent than the rose dress had been. And work kept her mind off Griff, kept her mind off what she would have to do.

Her sisters made sure she ate, for she had little appetite.

On the day of the Winter Gala, the three Gray sisters walked to the Gala, hand in hand, Atara on Varda's left, and Ozara on her right, dressed in similar embroidered silver gowns that flared around their simple silver shoes. Varda's dress had a motif of roses, and she wore a platinum belt set with pink sapphire and pink rhodochrosite and rose quartz. Atara's dress had a motif of crowns, and she wore a platinum crown headdress set with emerald and malachite and dark green jade. Ozara's dress had a motif of coins, and she wore a platinum necklace set with peridot and malachite and pale green jade. The pink gemstones made Varda's rosy pink cheeks

seem warmer, and the green gemstones made the twins' verdant green eyes seem brighter.

The ballroom was decorated in white and gray and black, and—as was customary—each gown or suit that each person wore had at least one of the three shades in it. Snowflake ice sculptures graced each table and encircled the stage. The three sisters sat near the stage, sharing the round table with Xenos, as well as Polux and Pluto. The entertainment tonight was an orchestra, composed of the best musicians from the finest music conservatory on Earth, and for a while Varda was able to forget what she was there for as the sound filled her and comforted her.

Ceres Snow had come not long after the Gray sisters had arrived, to her usual adoring crowds. A group of admirers surrounded her, like planets or asteroids orbiting a cold sun, unable to pull away, helplessly caught in her gravity, and not even receiving light in return. Varda could not understand what these people got from being so devoted to her.

Ceres had silvers and gold, but could not buy anything of value. She had a mouth, but spoke empty words. She had eyes, but saw worthless things. She had ears, but heard nothing important. She had hands, but not a heart. Many times those who followed her were just like her, and if they were not, they would soon become like the one they idolized. Or perhaps they idolized her because they were already like her.

And now she must pretend to be caught in Ceres' spell.

The form-fitting dress Ceres wore was stunning, but Varda had expected nothing less. It was white, a cold white, the color of snow and bone. Diamonds glittered all over the gown, encircling her from feet to neck. She resembled a living icicle that had been dusted with snow.

Hours passed, and Varda waited for something to happen. She ate, and she danced, and she spoke to all who approached her, and when they asked about the next gowns she would make and who would wear them, she would only smile, and say that there were so many offers to choose from.

One of the robot servers approached her, placing a piece of parchment upon her table. Nervous, she picked it up with unsteady fingers. Upon it was the logo of Thule Base, and four words handwritten in black ink: *Come at once. — Ceres.*

Immediately Varda rose from her seat and walked to where Ceres sat. She knew what it meant. She was not the first to receive such a letter. If you received such a letter—most people would have given anything for it,

and Varda had hoped for it herself—you obeyed. If you obeyed, Ceres might grant you a favor. It would benefit Ceres more than you, of course. If you did not obey, Ceres would ruin you.

When those around them saw Varda moving toward Ceres, the conversation quieted, and people began to whisper.

Ceres gave her a wintry smile that did not reach her eyes. She stood and walked away without a second glance, head held high, a bodyguard flanking each side. Varda followed several steps behind, head bent, mind unbent. She was afraid, and she forced most of the fear back inside. The rest of the fear she would need to show to Ceres.

Ceres led Varda to her spacious quarters, on the fourth floor—the highest floor—which housed the very best residences at Medii Base. Though it was only a secondary home, and only occasionally used, luxury surrounded them, from the crystal chandeliers to the marble walls, and Varda saw nearly everything in Ceres' quarters was earth-made. She also noted something else: there was nothing truly personal in the home, no vidpics in frames of anyone else besides Ceres, and there were no plants of any kind, which was unusual on the Moon, where everyone owned at least an aloe plant or tropical grasses.

A human servant brought over a crystal bottle filled with a clear liquid, pouring some of it into a matching goblet, handing it to Ceres. There was no second glass, no offer of refreshment. The lack of basic hospitality was deliberate, Varda knew, but she took no offense, as she had not expected courtesy. Ceres was showing her who was in charge in this conversation.

So Varda waited while Ceres drank slowly, the two bodyguards standing silently at either side of her, their black eyes focused on Varda. Ceres sat in an elegant tall chair. Other smaller chairs faced it, but Varda did not dare to sit.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed before Ceres spoke at last.

"You seem to have drawn much attention lately," she said, sipping from her glass. She turned, and Varda saw that her lips were pulled back. The look on Ceres' face was slightly feral, like a wolf or a snake that had just bared its fangs.

"I never wanted it," Varda said. It was the truth. While Varda had sought the attention, with the help of her friends, she had done it only for this moment. She would not tell Ceres that.

Ceres stood, and began walking around her, like a predator encircling its prey. Varda followed her with her eyes, letting her fear show.

“I believe you,” Ceres said, her voice smooth as ice. “I looked into your past. Even before you lost your fortune you remained in your sisters’ shadows.”

“I sew because I enjoy it. Not because I want fame or fortune,” Varda replied, keeping her voice low and unthreatening.

“Your discovery of the lost cargo certainly took care of your fortune,” Ceres said. She sat down again, and waved a hand to indicate Varda could sit at last, and, eyes still on Ceres, Varda carefully lowered herself into a nearby chair. Even then she only sat on the edge.

“Yes,” Varda said, her voice still quiet.

“Is that the reason for your eccentric proposal?”

Varda looked down at her hands, gripped tightly together in her lap. She was surprised her nails hadn’t drawn any blood. Perhaps it was only because it felt like her blood had drained out of her body.

“I want something with some meaning. Something money cannot buy. Something as personal as flesh and blood,” Varda said.

“So, you won’t sell your gowns for gold or silvers, but for flesh and blood?” Ceres murmured, a speculative look in her eyes. “It is almost gruesome, when you think about it. It is very appealing, in a strange way. I can respect that.”

If there had been any blood in Varda’s cheeks, it was gone.

Ceres paused for a moment, carefully swirling the goblet and its contents, and then continued. “When you first came here, you reminded me of someone I used to know. He always acted like he was too good for this sinful world. But perhaps I was wrong about you. Flesh and blood! I like it.”

Varda remained silent. Air seemed to have left the room, and it was hard for her to breathe. That was not what she had meant.

“You want something as personal as flesh and blood, something from the past,” Ceres said, her eyes hooded, deep in thought. She smiled the same cold smile as before. “What do you have in mind?”

“Do you have anything from the early days of Thule Base?” Varda said, making sure to put an awed tone in her voice this time. “I’ve heard so many good things about it. And it is one of the most prosperous bases. I know that Janus Snow was responsible.”

“Yes, you are right. Seventy-seven years ago my great-grandfather bought Thule with the last of his fortune. He built it into what it is today with the sacrifice of flesh and blood.”

Varda nodded. The words chilled her, but she made sure to keep a smile on her face.

“Everything I have from those days is valuable to me. I’m not sure I could part with any of it.”

One of the bodyguards shifted, drawing their attention. Ceres was the first to turn back, but Varda knew this chance could be her only opportunity.

“What are those medallions on his belt?” Varda said, gasping in awe.

Ceres glanced over and away. “Those?” she said, scornfully. “Those are just a part of the old spacesuits they wore. I have so many of—” she said, and then paused. Her eyes began to gleam, and Varda could see the thoughts whirling in their depths.

“I have so much affection for them.” Ceres said. She motioned the bodyguards even closer. “When my great-grandfather bought Thule he also bought the spacesuits worn by its founders. These spacesuits had something unique. Purely ornamental medallions on the belt plated in real gold, real silver.”

“They are all beautiful. I would love to have them,” Varda said.

“There are three. You want three medallions for two dresses? Now, that doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

“I guess not,” Varda said, humbly bowing her head.

“Well, I will have to think about it. I don’t even know if your dresses will be worth such a sacrifice. I think I should see what I am getting first. It is only fair.”

“Of course it is fair,” Varda replied, bowing her head.

Ceres set the medallions on a glass table, and signaled one of the bodyguards. Varda saw that the conversation was over. Forcing herself to look away from the medallion keys, Varda left. Her heart pounding, she went back to the gala. All eyes were on Varda, for everyone had seen her leave with Ceres. Soon whispers turned as loud as thunder.

Varda’s heart was also beating as loud as thunder, for blood had returned at last, and she realized she could breathe again.

Chapter 20

As the days passed, the year at last ended, and the first month began, full of all the promise that any new year held. Varda thought little of that, and spent her time working on the gown for the Sun Gala. So many people had come to see it that she had lost count. Those bold enough asked if she had sold the gown to Ceres, and she replied that she had not decided who to sell it to.

It had the desired effect: Ceres came occasionally late at night to check on the progress, and from the look in her cold, glimmering eyes, Varda knew that Ceres wanted the dress even more, even if it was only to keep anyone else from owning it. And it was going to be a magnificent gown. Made of gold lamé and gold satin, and partially overlaid with gold leaf, with stiff interfacing and stiff lining for support, the dress had a four inch wide gold-plated medallion at the front of the waist, with overlapping golden rays emanating out in all directions. Thin pieces of goldstone—a type of manufactured glittering glass made on the Moon—were attached with adhesives to the dress, and other gems, like yellow and orange diamonds and topaz, were placed in lightweight metal settings and attached to the dress as well. Still others were sewn on.

Holo-vid technology was also being used in the dress, which added a shimmering holographic glow around the garment, until the wearer truly looked like the sun. Ozara also designed a matching gold-plated crown set with the same jewels as the dress, and Atara would provide the hair and makeup design. And, of course, the dress required a great deal of detailed embroidery, all done by hand by Varda.

Varda kept herself busy, spending eighteen hours an earth-day or more on the dress. Atara and Ozara, along with Novia, would have to pull her away for even an hour’s break, to drink and eat and rest. Eventually, she avoided them all as time went by, locking them out of her quarters, refusing to answer any messages over the talk net. For three days she spoke to nobody, getting little rest, until the morning of the fourth day when a movement nearby caught her attention as she embroidered the skirt.

At her feet was a cleaner robot. A small hatch on the top of it had popped open. Bending down, Varda pulled out a small piece of paper, and on the paper was printed a short message: *Please come out. –Father.*

Curious, and a little ashamed, Varda put down the needle and fabric, and opened the door. Xenos stood there, hands clasped behind his back, a heavy sack slung over one shoulder, an exasperated look on his face.

“You look terrible,” he said. Even more embarrassed, Varda looked down at her shoes. He was undoubtedly right.

“How long did you work yesterday?” he asked.

“Twenty-one hours,” Varda said, her cheeks turning a deep rosy color.

Xenos sighed and shook his head.

“You help no one if you kill yourself with exhaustion,” Xenos said as he tugged at her arm, pulling her back inside. After taking a quick look at the gown she was sewing, he directed her away from the workstation to a couch in a separate room. The cleaner robot followed them, and she frowned at its strange behavior.

“The ball is still more than two earth-weeks away, and yet it looks like you are almost finished.”

“The intricate details take so much time, and I’d like to get started on the next dress, as soon as possible.”

“That can’t be the only reason,” Xenos said, looking at her intently.

Varda sighed, and rubbed her tired eyes with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand.

“You are right, of course. If I am honest with myself, I mostly spend so much time on the dress so I won’t think about Griff,” she said, shaking her head. “How can I infiltrate the base without getting anyone’s attention? Griff was undoubtedly caught. I don’t even know how I am going to find him, once I do get those keys.”

“What you should have done was ask for help,” Xenos said. “You are right: you can’t do it alone. So don’t try to do it alone.”

“I know.”

“Well, though you did not ask me, I think I have another idea.”

“What idea?” Varda said, as she leaned forward, excited and curious.

He smiled, and pulled out several machines from the bulky pack he had been carrying. Three more of the small circular cleaner robots. Brows furrowed, she took one from him and studied it.

“You sent one of these into my quarters,” Varda said, handing it back.

“It had been there for a while, you just didn’t notice it. When you didn’t come out for so long, I remotely triggered it so the hatch with the message opened.”

“You are right.” Amazed and amused, Varda laughed. “I didn’t even see it until then.”

Xenos laughed too, and picked up the cleaner robot from the floor, adding it to the others. “That is the point. You see them everyday, everywhere, and yet you do not see them, because you see them everyday, everywhere. They just quietly clean the floors. Other types of cleaner robots clean the walls, and other things as well. You do not notice them either.”

“Normally, they keep away from people. The sensors ensure they move away when someone walks close to them,” Varda said, pointing to the four sensors on the perimeter of the device.

“Yes, I know that. I’ve worked on many myself over the years, Varda,” Xenos said. The exasperation was back in his voice.

“I’m sorry. I guess I am not thinking clearly,” Varda admitted, pressing her fingers to her eyes and rubbing them again.

“Well, I am thinking clearly,” Xenos said. “And I came to realize that these are perfect for infiltration. They go everywhere, clean everything. And no one notices them.”

“You are right! It’s so simple, but I never thought of it,” Varda said.

“From what you have told me, and from what Astra has said, I am guessing Ceres’ security is geared more toward keeping her prisoners in, than toward keeping anyone out. I am sure she tightened security after Griff snuck in, but she doesn’t know that Astra is still alive, and she certainly doesn’t know about you, or you would probably be dead by now. She certainly wouldn’t want a dress from you!”

Rummaging in the pack, he pulled out a paper map that showed Thule Base and the surrounding craters to either side. It had been decided that they would not input sensitive material to the data pads.

“Here is what must be the main hangar,” Xenos said, pointing to the east side of the crater. “And here is close to where Griff landed”—Xenos indicated the west side—“and here is where the Wind siblings said the secret entrance is located”—Xenos pointed at the south side—“and is where you will be entering the base. I assume Griff entered through a secondary hangar, probably the one though which she brings all the helium-3 she has been mining.”

“Yes, that makes sense.”

“When you enter through the secret entrance, there will be a private chamber there, which still should have some basic supplies, and which you can use to hide in, if necessary. Then all you do is release these four cleaner robots. They will search the four quadrants of the base, as well as any secret chambers they find, recording information that not only should help us find Griff and the prisoners, but also the main power station as well.”

“They are already ready?” Varda could not hide the surprise from her face or her voice.

“No. I still have a lot to do. Anything I add into the machinery has to be exceptionally small. They will still have to be working cleaners if they are to remain undetected, after all.”

“Won’t the system detect the new machines?”

“I don’t think so. On a base so big there will be at least several thousand of them. Broken ones are replaced all the time, and there may be dozens out of commission at the same time. Programming is the same for all of them: empty their load at a waste station every four hours, visit a charging station once daily, send a message to a server robot if they are broken or otherwise incapacitated. Plus, they all look the same. And, as I’ve already demonstrated, people don’t seem to notice them, especially if they are working normally and properly. I’ll make sure they are working well. And just in case, I will also program a server robot that can retrieve a malfunctioning one. Servers are more noticeable, of course, so I hope we will not have to use it.”

“What about the infrared illuminators you talked about? Are they done?” Varda asked.

Nodding, Xenos pulled out the illuminators, which would be mounted in place of the usual lights attached to her spacesuit. The compact illuminators would shine a beam of infrared light, which was nearly invisible to the naked eye, but not invisible to the night vision equipment he would install in her helmet. She would need such a thing to approach the hidden entrance and not be seen. Thule Base was in a crater of eternal night, where darkness reigned. Any visible light would be seen for miles.

Though it was doubtful anyone would see her from the base, there would be helium-3 collectors or lunar rovers on the surface that might notice her. Even a lunar flyer might see her. If she could remain invisible on the surface of the Moon, her mission would be more likely to be

successful. It was one of her few advantages. Another advantage would be that she would be able to see any nearby helium-3 collectors or rovers or any other spacecraft, who would not bother to hide their own lights.

“You have thought a lot about how to help me,” Varda said. “Thank you.”

Xenos pulled his youngest daughter into a comforting embrace. “If you want to thank me, you can take a break for the rest of today. And tonight, I want you to get a full eight hours of rest. But first, you must get something to eat.”

Leaving her quarters, the two walked to a nearby dining establishment for breakfast, and once seated there in an open space below the sky simulator they spoke of ordinary, simple things. Afterwards, they went for a walk through Medii Base, and they ended up at last in the arboretum, where they walked the paths several times, admiring the great variety of trees and other plants around them. At last they sat down on a stone bench together, far from the few others who were still there. It was peaceful and soothing.

“You never did tell me how you know Astra,” Varda asked.

“We met years and years ago. We were younger than you at the time,” said Xenos. He was gazing off into the distance, and his eyes seemed to be looking straight into the past. “It was at the Sky Gala, during the eighth month of that year. I had not been there to see her at the Star Gala the previous month, but it was said by many of those who were that she was the brightest star of all. And she dazzled me when I first met her. I could barely stand upright on my own two feet when she was around. And she felt much the same, but without my stumbling! Still, there was a problem that could not be overcome. We were from two different worlds.”

“I know how that feels,” Varda said, sniffing back the tears threatening to fall.

“Yes, I know you do. I had always lived on the Earth, and she had always lived on the Moon. And neither of us was willing to leave our homes. So the two of us decided it was simply not meant to be. And when an emergency called me back to Earth soon after that, we took it as a sign. Time passed, and we lost touch. A year or so later she married Orion. And by then I had met your mother, and any lingering feelings I had for Astra were gone and forgotten, for I loved your mother passionately and with my whole heart. After Sanna died, I thought I could never love again. But

when I saw Astra, somehow still alive, all those old feelings were reborn, and it was like I was a teenager who had discovered love for the very first time. I know it sounds foolish."

"Not to me it doesn't," Varda reassured him.

"And now we are so much older, and our lives have changed so much over the years. I have lived on the Moon, and learned to make it my home. She has lived on the Earth, and learned to make it her home. We have bridged both worlds. I told her that I will live anywhere she wants, and she has told me that she will live anywhere I want. We know now that home is with the people you love."

Varda blinked back the tears before they could roll down her face.

"We will find a way to save him, to save all of them," Xenos said, laying a hand on her shoulder, for he had seen her tears.

"Or I will die trying," Varda added, wiping away a tear that had managed to spill down her cheek despite her best efforts. "Or we will die trying. I am so afraid, so scared. And if I am discovered, surely you will be as well."

"What better reason could a person have to give their life, than to save someone they love? Months and months ago, before I first went out helium-3 mining, I said that 'we all have to die sometime.' It might as well be for the best reason of all."

"Astra could be in danger as well," Varda added.

"I know she would accept that danger in order to save her son," Xenos said.

"I have to succeed," she replied.

"We have to succeed," he said. "You are not alone."

Varda nodded, before drawing him close in a tight embrace. And for the first time in a month, she felt safe and strong, and ready to face anything, even death.

Chapter 21

The Sun Gala was a glittering, glamorous affair, and there was no one more glittering and more glamorous than Ceres.

Everyone was talking about the great triumph that Ceres had made in buying the very first dress Varda made for the public. Varda wisely refused any interview that did not also involve Ceres, and she made sure to speak about how beautiful Ceres would look in the dress, and how Varda was truly honored to be chosen to design a gown for her. The gambit worked, and Ceres soon regained all the renown she had always desired.

Varda was now set for life, career-wise, but people were also associating her fame with Ceres, and Ceres spoke to all who would listen—and there were many who would—of how she had discovered such a bright new talent, and few contradicted her. Varda only minded a little, mostly because of the overwhelming hatred she felt toward Ceres that she was forced to hide, but also because there was a small part of her that did like the fact that so many people now loved her dresses. And despite what Ceres was now claiming, it was Varda's own talent—and the help of Varda's friends—that had captured the attention of both worlds.

And it was a beautiful dress, perhaps the most intricate dress she had done.

Compared to Ceres, Varda was dressed plainly, in a sleek floor-length white velvet gown, with golden circles embroidered around the top of the boat neck and around the bottom of the skirt, and golden suns embroidered on the matching white velvet belt. The gold medallion from Ceres gleamed in the center of the belt. A simple gold chain necklace and earrings, as well as white velvet shoes, completed the look.

Compared to Ceres, everyone was dressed plainly. None of the guests at the gala came even close to matching the magnificence that was Ceres. Atara had lightly dusted golden glitter all over Ceres' face, hair and skin. Her lips and eyelids had received a thicker dusting of glitter, and the holo-vid technology amped up the whole effect. Ceres was already being called a "goddess of the sun" on the talk net.

The entire ballroom was decorated in shades of gold and white, with gold-plated goblets and plates and bowls on white lace tablecloths. The clear moonglass globes had been exchanged with pale yellowish ones, casting a soft warm glow.

A choir was the entertainment this time, and soon the air was filled with song, from the highest soprano to the deepest bass. Sometimes only women would sing, and sometimes only men would sing. From solos to trios, from a cappella to four-part harmony, their voices made Varda's heart sing and dance.

Her heart had lightened since her father had spoken to her. She was still afraid, but the fear was contained and controlled, tamed and trammeled. It helped knowing that she was not alone, and that a plan—a good plan—was in place. Her father had already begun work on a better, more detailed map, using a holo-vid projector. Once the cleaner robots got inside, they could create a three-dimensional model of the secret station. Her sisters and Novia and Astra would help in any way they could, and the Wind family was already working on giving her father more details on the inside of the base, mostly the layout, but also where important machinery was most likely located based on where it had been in the past.

But the thing that truly gave her hope was the key she now wore on her belt, given to her only three days previously in exchange for her gown. Behind locked doors she had opened it and found it was intact. All she needed now was the second key, and she had already started on the next gown. She worried often that Ceres would lose interest in the second gown, now that she already had the first, now that the attention was back on Ceres. The second gown would have to be even better.

And when Ceres did not come around afterwards, she knew she had to do something.

So when many more people wanted to see the second gown, she obliged, even allowing people to watch her sew for a few hours a day. The talk net soon switched back to focusing on Varda, and even more outrageous trades were suggested. One person offered the wedding dress worn by an ancient queen and another person offered a page from an old illuminated manuscript, hand-lettered and hand-painted with gold.

They were more than worthy trades, as they had all been. She pretended to consider each and every one of them.

Meanwhile, she worked on the dress every earth-day, spending the hours between dawn and dusk making sure each embroidered stitch was perfect, making sure each bead and each gem was perfectly placed. Though in many ways this dress was far simpler looking, she had to make sure each circle was perfect symmetrical, and finishing it would take just as long as

the first dress had taken. And through it all Varda made sure to take frequent breaks and to spend time with her family and friends. Each minute and each moment was a precious gem, and Varda drew each one to herself, like a dragon of old protecting its hoard from robbers and thieves.

The time passed quicker than Varda had expected, and the dress was finished with only a few days to spare. That night, only hours after it was done at last, Ceres came to her quarters, accompanied again by her ever present bodyguards.

“I see you have finished my dress,” she said, without preamble.

“I didn’t know you still wanted it,” Varda said, making sure to sound slightly insulted. “You must know you are not the only one who wants it. There is a wedding dress worn by royalty that I would really like to have. The Root family owns it, and brought it over yesterday for me to look at. I think it will be perfect.”

“But we had an agreement! I assumed you understood? A sun medallion for a sun dress, a moon medallion for a moon dress.” Ceres nodded her head, and one of her guards held the moon medallion to the light, where it gleamed like a star.

“I don’t remember that we had an agreement,” Varda countered. “You said you would only trade if you liked the dress. When you didn’t come around to see the second one, naturally I believed you did not want it. So I made other arrangements.”

Ceres bared her teeth again. Varda did not have to fake the fear that made her step back.

“You will accept this as payment.” The words came out in a hiss.

Varda shuddered, and backed even further away.

Ceres laughed at Varda’s obvious fear, the most sinister laugh Varda had ever heard.

“We did have an agreement. Besides, no one else could give you something quite as rare,” Ceres said, certainty in her voice. Looking at her, Varda could see that she wore pride and authority like a cloak, for she had rarely been denied anything she wanted.

“You are right. I am sure I forgot,” Varda said quickly. “The medallion is so beautiful and rare, and I would be honored to accept this one as well.” The bodyguard handed it to her, and then lifted the dress in his arms, careful not to wrinkle the fabric, before he followed his mistress out the door.

Varda gasped out a sigh of relief once they were gone. Her legs gave way, and she collapsed to the floor. She had done it! She had really done it. Part of her still couldn’t believe it.

She stared at the key and then carefully opened it. It was in perfect condition. And it was beautiful. It was strange to think of a key as beautiful, but if this key and the two others could save Griff and the captives, they were indeed the most beautiful and rare things in the world.

Chapter 22

Like the Sun Gala, the Moon Gala was also a glittering, glamorous affair, and there was no one more glittering and more glamorous than Ceres.

Perfectly circular moons had been embroidered on the entirety of the gown Varda had made for Ceres. At the top the moons were full moons, and as the silver-stitched moons progressed down the deep black dress, they went through the entire lunar cycle. From full moons, to waning gibbous moons, to half moons, to waning crescent moons, to new moons, to waxing crescent moons, to half moons, to waxing gibbous moons, and at last to full moons again at the bottom of the three foot long train that extended past her feet in a lovely arc, held away from her body at her feet by a stiff undergarment that seemed to swirl and sway back and forth when she walked. The lighted portions of the embroidered moons were represented with various gray and white-gray stones—that helped to give depth to the craters and plains—such as agates and pearls and quartz, and a lot of moonstones. There were also some diamonds; though like the sun-motif dress, they were far outnumbered by the other types of stones. The darkened portions of the embroidered moons were covered with other black or deep gray-black stones, like onyx, hematite, and obsidian. Most were either sewn on as beads, or fastened with adhesive, and the more valuable stones were set in metal settings.

Xenos had designed some clever hover-bracelets made of platinum and encrusted with tiny diamonds for Ceres' wrists. Ozara had designed a halo-shaped, crown-like headdress that encircled Ceres' head, and Atara had accented her face with shimmering silver eyelids and lips, and hair colored a grayish white. The crown was made of nickel and plated with platinum, and set with more tiny diamonds. Varda was not surprised when Ceres was called a "goddess of the moon" by the talk net, which had pics and vids of the dress available to all within minutes of the start of the gala.

Varda's own dress was simple, and was nearly the same as the dress she had worn at the Sun Gala, except, of course, that this dress had black velvet instead of white velvet, a moon motif instead of a sun design, and silver instead of gold. The moon medallion gleamed at her waist, the final key. Her two medallions, together with the one given by Borea, were a complete set, all in working order.

Varda remembered little of the gala, little of who she talked to, little of what she heard. All she could think of was the three keys she held. All she could think of was Griff. She had only come because it would have been suspicious if she had been absent.

When it was at last over, she went back to her quarters to change out of the dress at last, exchanging it for simpler traveling clothes, packing little besides the three medallions, which she tucked in a pouch between her breasts, just above her heart. Her sisters and father soon joined her, her sisters in less simple traveling clothes, her father carrying a large bag, and together the four of them boarded the underground maglev vacuum train to make the journey from Medii Base to Peary Base. It was a long journey in distance, though not a long journey in time, for maglev trains run in a vacuum could reach speeds of up to four thousand miles per hour. Most passenger trains did not run so fast, however, averaging between sixteen hundred and twenty-four hundred miles per hour.

It was an eerily smooth ride, and still slightly disconcerting to many of those onboard, and it made Varda slightly nervous. There were no windows on the cylindrical-shaped train cars, and outside was only the vacuum of the Moon, underneath an arced ceiling of lunar rock, thick and heavy, as thick as the layer above the bases. There had never been an accident yet, though there was always the possibility. Varda consoled herself with the fact that if they crashed, she would be dead in an instant. Though crashing was not the only possibility, of course. There was also the chance that a small breach could occur, exposing them to the vacuum. There were emergency helmets and masks and oxygen tanks at each chair, in a variety of sizes, but those only worked if you could get it over your face and mouth in time. Some people wore a full spacesuit onboard the trains, just in case.

When she had first come to the Moon, Varda had toured the maglev tunnels. They had been well-built, well-thought-out affairs, with emergency lights and skylights, same as most of the bases, as well as emergency entrances and exits that could be accessed from the Moon’s surface. Still, nothing ever quite got rid of the caution that she felt every time she boarded the train.

They were not the only ones aboard. Hundreds of people were spread among the train cars, Varda knew, though she could not see into or go into any of the other compartments, as each was sealed to keep the pressurized

air inside. Most of the people aboard were colonists who lived in Peary Base, and who had only come to Medii for the gala. Now that the gala was over, they were heading back home. Xenos had arranged new quarters at Peary, reasoning that he wanted for them to be closer to Thule for when Varda infiltrated the base. Preparations were finished, and they would begin that evening.

After departing the train, Atara and Ozara headed back to their quarters for the night, after giving their father and sister one last embrace and one last goodbye. Then Varda followed Xenos through several domes, her steps light but somehow still heavy, and at last she found herself in some little used supply rooms on the outskirts of Peary Base. Xenos unpacked the bag, pulling out two spacesuits. After braiding and then tucking her long hair under a thick cap, Varda put on the full spacesuit, helped by a server robot, and joined her father, who was also suited up, after placing the three medallions in a front pocket. The two then walked out of a small private airlock onto the surface of the Moon. The sky above was lit only by the stars. Out in the darkness stood a large shape, their Eagle flyer.

The lunar craft had been altered, its usual exterior lights replaced by infrared illuminators to match the suits they now wore. The main viewscreen had been adapted as well to accommodate the night vision tech. The new three-dimensional printer stood to one side of the cabin in the fully-stocked craft, next to the four cleaner robots, already in a large backpack, and many more updates had been made as well.

After firing up the thrusters, which had been replaced with quieter models, Xenos steered the craft toward Thule. It was strange seeing everything in green. Varda had wondered why infrared illuminators were not standard issue, and had asked her father about it. He had explained that the longer lasting, more powerful lights they ordinarily used were preferred, especially since others could see them, if you needed to be rescued out on the Moon. And you could see them: below their craft she watched as the occasional ships traversed the bottom of the crater, like moving stars in an upside down sky.

Xenos flew the craft around the rim of Peary Crater, the computer tracking the lights on the surface. He landed in a smaller crater—long emptied of water ice—on the edge of the south side of Thule Base.

He stayed behind, and Varda descended the stairs onto the lunar surface, the bulky pack slung over her back. She flipped on the green night vision

display. She did not need to walk far until she saw it, a hollow in the side of the crater, very similar to the entrance to Griff's base.

This entrance was much smaller, only big enough to accommodate a rover or a person. The natural walls of the tunnel led inward for thirty yards, and seemed to terminate in a dead end. She had been told to expect this, and so she searched until she found it: a small crevasse hidden behind an outcropping of rock, just narrow enough for her to duck into it, but long and curving.

Beyond was a larger, perfectly square chamber, lined with sheets of metal. Soft lights lit when she entered, and she quickly turned off the night vision. Many, many circles had been engraved deep in the surface of the walls, and were bisected by lines, also engraved deep in the surface.

She studied them until she found the one that was a compass rose. It was then that she pulled out the first key, the sun medallion.

"East of the sun," she whispered, more to give herself courage than because she had forgotten. Using a small tool to open it, for her gloves were too bulky, she placed the long thin metal key into the center of the compass, and then pulled it along the groove to the east marker, where she turned it. A slight click sounded, and she pulled it back out, and then stepped away as a large round door swung inward.

Closing it behind her, she walked through it as more lights lit up the walls. A similar room stood beyond the first. Once again, Varda found the compass rose. "West of the moon," she said as she pulled the moon medallion key to the west marker of the compass. Again a door opened to her.

Unlike the rest, in the third chamber were several more compass roses, one on each wall. Following Borea's instructions, she ignored all but the one in the floor. "North of the stars, south of the sky," she said, pulling her stars and sky medallion key first to the north, then turning it, before pulling her key to the south, then turning it.

Stepping back, she watched as a door opened upward. Steps led downward, and Varda saw several moonglass lamps slowly lighting the tunnel below from top to bottom. After closing the final door after her, she finished her descent into the base.

Below was a door, leading to an airlock chamber. Beyond was the domed room that the Wind family had told her about. Everything was outdated, but it had its own private air and water and food and power

supplies, enough to keep one person alive for a year, if Varda guessed right. It was also connected to the main base as well. For what should have been a utilitarian place, it was surprisingly lovely inside, with artwork hung on the twelve-foot high walls that divided the large room into smaller chambers, as well as soft chairs and sofas and beds. There were also desks and entertainment centers and other supplies.

She went past all that, through a door, and then through several other small chambers that were mostly filled with old and broken electronics and other detritus, until she at last entered one of the large storage rooms beneath Thule Base. It was past midnight, and deserted, and only a few lights lit the ceiling high above her, as well as the walls around her. A small cleaner robot slowly paced the floor thirty feet away, whirring nearly soundlessly.

Carefully closing the door, making sure she made no noise, she backed away into the room she had just left. Crouched in a corner behind a stack of supplies, she pulled out the four cleaners. Placing them under a pallet, where they would not be seen, she turned them on, and then waited a moment until they began to drive away, exiting through the small hole in the wall near the door. Soon they would be joining the rest, each of them merely another cleaner robot doing its job, going in and out of each room, unseen and unnoticed. And once they had gotten all the information she needed, they would return to the very spot they came from.

Making sure she didn't leave any trace, she went back into the room from before, and if she had not known what she was looking for, she would not have seen the door, disguised as if it was as part of a wall, behind a storage tower bolted to the door. It locked behind her.

She pulled out the final thing from her pack, a signal relay, with amplifier and communicator included, which she set on a nearby table. Tapping its screen, she accessed it.

"Xenos, can you hear me?" she asked, and waited, hardly daring to breathe.

"Yes, I can hear you," he answered. The voice sounded far away, but it was clear.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she continued.

"Are you getting the signals from the cleaners?"

"Yes. Everything is working fine. You can come back now, Varda."

Leaving was faster. Making sure each of the secret doors was locked behind her, and that the lights turned off when she left, Varda made her way back to the flyer, hid another signal relay under a few nearby rocks, and the two of them departed in the darkness.

Once through the airlock and back inside Peary Base, she removed her helmet and bulky gloves. All at once the exhaustion of the day hit, and she sat on a bench and put her head in her hands. It was now the third hour past midnight.

After putting an arm around her, and giving her a quick hug, Xenos pulled out one last signal relay, placing it in a corner. A few quick motions of his hand later, and information scrolled across the screen. It was transmitting. It was working.

Putting it back into standby mode, Xenos finished removing his suit. Following his lead, she took her own off, and soon she walked with him on the long trek back to their quarters.

She was asleep almost as soon as she lay down on her bed, and that night she dreamed that Griff had sprouted wings and was flying far above her, free and unfettered.

Chapter 23

It took eight days for the cleaner robots to search Thule Base. Going from room to room, from dome to dome, following the system of interconnected ducts that went through many of the walls, they passively collected basic scans, and the scans were relayed back to Varda. Slowly but steadily, a three-dimensional map of the base began to form, and Varda and her family and friends studied it as the days went by. Eurus, Zefir, Notus, and Borea noted what had changed over the years, and what had stayed the same.

The faces of the people of Thule were briefly scanned as well to determine identities. Public records revealed most to be normal colonists, but there were a few unknown people, ones that Varda believed were former captives that now served Ceres for special privileges.

On the eighth day the robots found the captives, and on the tenth day they found Griff.

The prisoners were in a single, crowded dome, with inner walls that rose all the way to the ceiling. Griff was in an outlying building, in what appeared to be an abandoned wing of a medical center. Facial recognition tech identified him. He was asleep or drugged, and he had mostly returned to looking human again.

Over the next three days and nights, Xenos had three of the cleaner robots tasked with scanning the dome that housed Ceres' slaves. These robots tracked the comings and goings on in the base, and it was soon revealed that during six hours each night all but a few of the prisoners were in their quarters sleeping. During these hours the medical bay was empty but for twelve patients and three workers—located in a separate wing, and far away from Griff.

The other robot had a different task, according to Xenos, one that would help them in their plan to rescue the captives.

But all Varda could think of was Griff. They now had enough information to risk going inside. They had determined hiding places, access points, and escape routes. But maps could only aid their journey: they needed firsthand knowledge of the area. And so on the fourth night of the third month Varda snuck in the same way she had before. She went by herself, but she was not alone, for Xenos was at the other end of a

communicator, to be used only in an emergency. This time, she removed the spacesuit before entering Thule Base.

She did not get far. A blinking light at her wrist went off just after she entered the storage area. Crouching behind a tall pallet, she watched a woman walking up and down the rows. Some sort of monthly inventory, Varda guessed.

For an hour she hid, her legs cramping, until the woman left at last. Blessing the proximity device her father had given her, she went on, avoiding anyone else.

The dome was at the southeast side of the crater that held Thule Base, hidden behind a secret door in one of the outer storage chambers in the lower levels. During the long walk to it she was filled with a mixture of nervousness and calmness. Though every step led her further away from safety, every step also led her closer to Griff.

At last, she was at the door. As expected, the security consisted of only a genetic and biometric scanner. It was the one stroke of luck she had. Thanks to bureaucracy, all of the scanners had an override function. The Lunar Group needed the authority to enter any space on any of the bases in case of an emergency. When people had first come to the Moon, there had been no such measures, and a man had died in his locked quarters after an accident, for it had taken rescue workers too long to break through the door. Since then, several carefully vetted people on each of the bases had been entrusted with an override chip.

Varda had not even known such a thing existed until recently. Safety measures—again courtesy of bureaucracy—prevented most problems from happening, and it had been over seventy years since they had needed to use the override. If Varda and her family did not know of it until recently, it was highly possible Ceres did not know either. The Wind family had known, but only because they had been on the Moon during that last emergency. Borea had given her the override chip only hours before, smiling when she had asked where it had come from.

“Try not to lose it,” Borea had said.

Varda had realized then that she shouldn’t question further. No doubt they were breaking some sort of law, though she did not feel guilty, and doubted Borea felt guilty either. If the plan was successful, they would fulfill the ultimate purpose of the chip, which was to save people in danger.

Pulling out the chip, she pressed it to the underside of the scanner. Small green lights on both devices came to life. A few seconds later—a long few seconds during which Varda could not help but hold her breath—the lights extinguished. Carefully she pressed her hand to the scanner. If the override had been successful, it should allow her inside, indeed, should allow anyone with a pulse to press their hand against it and come through.

The door clicked open with a puff of air, and Varda released the air in her own lungs. It had worked. Gingerly retrieving the chip, she walked inside, nerves taut.

The medical center was not far, and Varda walked down deserted pathways, her steps confident and sure, following the map that the cleaner robots had provided, the map that she had studied over and over until she knew it nearly by heart. The crowded living quarters were on the opposite side of the dome from where Griff was held, she knew, as well as the entrances that led to the eight domes that all housed hydroponics with a limited variety of plants: the scans had revealed mostly potatoes and beans and corn, the meager sustenance of prisoners. Only a few dim lights lit the way, and Varda trekked through the shadows that lay heavily everywhere. It was a cheerless, windowless place made of gray lunar stone. There were no green plants in this dome, no bright painted walls. The rooms and hallways were dank and dark and dismal and devoid of all but the most utilitarian furnishings. Most of these doors had no scanners, for it seemed that at the very least the prisoners had free access to much of their prison. It was undoubtedly because the important lock wasn’t a lock; it was the device attached to the brainstems of those imprisoned here, which would keep everyone inside the dome. The scanners were only for Ceres and her overseers.

The door to where Griff was had a second biometric scanner, and, like the first door, she used the override chip to bypass its security.

Griff was motionless, lying on his side on a medical bed in a small room. One ankle and one wrist were chained to the bed, with just enough slack so that he could reach the nearby wash station. He appeared to be drugged, and did not wake when she shook his shoulder, first gently, then firmly. Leaning closer, she could see the barest rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

Though she had seen the scans, her first sight of him with human features was still a shock, even more of a shock than her first sight of him

with beast features. All of the thick heavy fur had fallen out, to be replaced with a spiky fuzz of brown hair on his head. Facial hair—human facial hair—was coming back as well, brows and beard, and she ran a hand over the rough bristles. He had lost weight, about forty pounds or so. The strange ungainly angles of his bones were gone, and his wrists and ankles and fingers and toes had thinned out and lengthened to human proportions. His claws were now normal human nails, almost completely grown back, for they must have fallen out as well. But in many ways he was still the same, and the one eye was still higher than the other. His face, with its elegant, curved nose, and regal deep-set eyes, was still the strong, noble face of an eagle, and his body, with its muscular arms and legs, was still the strong, noble body of a lion. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen, and even in sleep he had the face and look of a king of old, and she could see him commanding armies, leading them to victory with a booming shout and a battle song.

She kissed his closed eyes, and then she kissed his cheeks. And then she searched the room, pulling open doors and drawers, looking through vials and bags of medication—those were in a cabinet beyond Griff's reach, were he awake—carefully replacing everything once she had looked it over.

She understood nothing. It might as well have been written in an ancient language. The only ones she recognized were saline and blood supplies. Frustrated, she recorded the words found on every vial, entering them into her data pad.

With a trembling hand, she researched the medications. Of the variety of drugs in Griff's medical room, there were several which could have been the one used, and there were several that counteracted them. But she had no way of knowing which one had been given to him, and without knowing that, she could not know the drug that could wake him. If she chose wrong, it could hurt him badly, even kill him.

At last, defeated, she slumped on a stool at his side. Taking his hands in her own, she spent the next few hours watching over him, until at last she was forced to leave, fearing discovery.

Even so, she returned the next night, just to spend time at his side. She knew he could not hear her, could not see her, could not feel her. But perhaps he could sense her all the same. Sometimes when she looked at his

face, he seemed to smile in his sleep. Or perhaps that was only her imagination.

On the third night she came again. As she had before, she kissed his closed eyes and his cheeks, and then, before she could react, Griff pulled her to him, kissing her lips.

Jumping back with a gasp, she found herself looking at his eyes. They were open wide, and golden-brown, and the black color that had darkened the whites of his eyes had faded away, gone forever. Love shone out of his eyes, and she thought she could see the gleam of unshed tears.

“How is this possible? How can this be?” Varda asked, gripping his arm. Leaning forward, she pressed her cheek to his. Griff’s arms surrounded her, gently but firmly.

“There are good people here. They have been looking out for me. They helped me when they knew you had come,” Griff said, sitting up, taking her with him, unwilling to let her go. His voice had changed too; though it was still quiet and low, deep and rough, it was now very … human.

“They told me that an unknown woman had come to visit me, and I knew it must be you, though you will have to tell me just how you got in,” Griff said. “Then they switched the vials, for I am given an injection each night, meant to hurry the genetic change while I sleep. Even so, the drugs are powerful, and the last dose is not fully out of my system, and so I fell asleep anyway, and woke to your wonderful greeting.”

Varda blushed, and found she could not look him in the eyes.

Gently tipping her chin up, he claimed his mouth with her own, in a kiss more passionate than the first. She clung to him, desperate with need and love.

Gasping as warmth spread in her belly, she shook her head to clear it, pulling away. She could not feel this way, not now, not when so much was at stake.

“How did this happen?” she asked. “How did you get captured? You mentioned you got a signal. Tell me.”

“One question at a time, if you please,” Griff said, as he laughed. Oh, how she loved that sound! Oh, how she missed that sound! Her heart was beating so fast! When had that happened?

“I had lost all hope of ever finding a way inside, when I got a signal. It was a radio signal.”

“You said that in that message you left for me. I thought no one used radio anymore. We have much more efficient methods of communication.”

“That is precisely why it was so perfect. My eldest brother Linus was fascinated by ancient technology, and collected old engines and old radio equipment. Remember that relay and communication station I took you to? Remember the unmanned outpost?”

She nodded at his words.

“Well, years ago Linus set up a radio transmitter and a modified antenna at both our base and the outpost. He and Rufus would communicate back and forth that way. They mostly did it for fun. It was a secret way they could talk to each other, and teen boys love secrets.”

“Teen boys also seem to love electronics,” Varda said. “My father’s first —and, I guess, last—career was in electronics.”

“Yes. Well, I had forgotten all about the radio. But it was still hooked into our computer system. And no one could have been more surprised than I when the signal came.”

“Who sent it?”

“One of her helium-3 miners was responsible. He was getting older, and he knew he would soon be too weak to work anymore for her, too weak to be useful. He knew what happened to the others. Before he had been captured, he had worked in electronics. Over the many years he collected spare parts, parts that had been deemed useless, and used them to cobble together a radio transmitter and antenna. He hid them on board the mining vehicle he manned when it went out, transmitting a signal wherever he went. No one on board ever guessed. Ceres’ goons never knew either. How could they? They had no way to even pick up the signal. But I did. When he first talked to me he told me he never really expected anyone to answer, but that he hoped they would.”

Turning his head away, he pressed his hands to his eyes. Varda realized he was wiping away tears, but did not want her to see. She turned away as well, letting him keep his pride.

When he spoke again, his voice was thick.

“Do you know the first message I got? It said: ‘Please help. I am a captive at Thule. If you cannot help, please remember my name. I am Orion Titan Wood, born the twelfth day of the seventh month of the year 3933 on Earth in Niobe, Third Continent.’”

“His name was Orion? Your father’s name?”

“I know it is a common proper name. I just … when I heard it I … had to help him.”

“I forgot! I have something I need to tell you,” Varda said, as she caressed his face with both hands. “Your mother is alive!”

“Now can that be? How is it even possible?” He gripped her arms, shock in his face. Happiness—sheer, utter delight—filled his voice, and Varda laughed.

“She was at the base you sent me to. She was on Earth the entire time. And for all that time she believed you were dead.”

This time Griff did not hold back the tears, and Varda joined him.

After a few moments he composed himself.

“What happened after you got the message?” Varda asked, still sniffing.

“I sent one back. I explained who I was and what Ceres had done to me, which he understood, for he too had been experimented on, though he looks normal. He thought of a plan to sneak me on base.”

“How?”

“He arranged for one of the four pods of a helium-4 container—the ones used for harvesting—to be empty, and stay empty. All I had to do was drive my rover inside and wait.”

“Couldn’t you have done that yourself?”

“It is set up that containers cannot be tampered with from the outside, at least not without the tampering being obvious. Also, a worker always verifies and scans the cargo before it is loaded. He made sure that worker was him.”

“Then how did she catch you?”

“Did she?”

Varda stared at him, clearly confused.

“We had a plan. Over the years Orion learned enough about the restraint chips implanted in the neck of each captive to construct a device capable of overloading them. He finally finished it a few months ago. But there were problems with the deactivator. First, it took a great deal of energy, and he could only siphon off energy by small amounts, lest anyone notice. Second, suppose he did manage to free a few people. If they made it to the authorities, Ceres would kill the rest.”

“The only way would be to free everyone at once,” Varda said.

“Yes. My presence helped Orion, mostly because I brought with me the power cells from my rover, which provided the needed energy. There was

even enough to construct a bomb powerful enough to break through the walls, once all the chips were disabled. Still, he knew it would take several years to make the required devices, especially since he could only do it in the limited time off he gets, which is of necessity mostly spent sleeping. He needed more free time. I could not help him as I do not have the skills to do what he does. Also, I needed—I wanted—to be cured. So, a few earth-days after he smuggled me in we blasted a hole in the outer hangar door so that it looked like I had used that method to break in, inadvertently blowing up the collection vehicle where he was supposedly fixing the communications array."

"That worked? Wouldn't she soon discover that the vehicle was empty?"

"We made sure the fire was so hot and fast that it melted the metal and everything inside. She could not even search for a body. Not that she cared about that, once she had 'captured' me."

"Why hadn't you thought of such a thing earlier?"

"The hangar entrance was always well hidden, especially in this crater where it is always dark. Plus, even if I had found it, I would not dare to blast my way in, as I could easily kill someone inside."

Varda nodded. "That makes sense. And then once she had you she cured you."

"Yes. But one thing I hadn't counted on was that she has a drug that hastens the process." He shook his head, and she ached inside at the pain she could see in his face. "It takes a toll. I have been told that my life will be shortened, and I will never be perfectly healthy."

"Oh, Griff!" Varda covered her mouth with her fingers.

"It is a price I am more than willing to pay," he said, taking her hands in his own. "The main problem was that it has ruined our plans. I thought I had at least a year. Now I only have a few days. Orion is not finished, far from it. We will have to figure something out. Though maybe—"

Griff paused, a speculative look in his eyes.

"I forgot to ask. How did you find your way in? And the scanners … how did you make it past them?"

"A secret entrance that even Ceres does not know about," Varda said. "As for the rest, it is a long story."

"Perhaps you will tell it to me sometime. But first, can you take someone with you?"

"Of course! But who?"

“Orion. He is thought to be dead now. He has been spending his time in various hiding places working. I believe your father could help him.”

Reaching underneath the mattress, Griff pulled out a small, flat object. It looked like a medical sensor. But when he pressed it, she knew it could only be a communicator.

“She is here,” he said into the device.

A few minutes later, the proximity alarm her father had given her started flashing. The screen revealed three people coming down the hall, directly toward them. She glanced up, in alarm, in fear, a question in her eyes.

“Do not worry. They are all friends,” Griff said in answer, as he pulled her close.

Three soft knocks made Varda jump.

“Come in,” Griff said.

A man and a woman walked in, holding hands. They were dressed in shabby gray work clothes and even shabbier shoes. She judged them to be about thirty years of age, with worn faces, prematurely aged through worry and work.

An elderly man, dressed in the same fashion, his face lined and leathery, came up behind them. Varda was shocked by how old he appeared. The man walked to the corner of the room and pressed his back against the wall, and calmly looked down at his hands. It was the actions of a person who was either shy or cautious, or both.

“I am Libra, and this is my husband Rigel and his father Orion,” the woman said, as the two stood before them, only a few feet away. Still fascinated by the unassuming Orion, Varda reluctantly turned toward the young couple.

“We have been here our whole lives,” Rigel added, as he squeezed his wife’s hand. “My father has been here most of his adult life.”

“During those years we have longed to escape. And now we have hope,” Libra said. “You are the only person who has managed to find their way inside these walls and not be caught. And you disabled the gene scanners! I didn’t know that was even possible.”

“But how did you know I was here?” Varda asked, curious. “I was very careful to avoid anyone else.”

“We too are changed like your friend was. Our DNA was altered to give us superior strength and stamina. Sometimes it gave us other abilities,

unforeseen abilities," Libra said. "It gave me a superior sense of smell. I occasionally work in food service here. Yesterday, when I came to bring Griff his daily ration"—she pointed at the pass-through slot in the door—"I caught the scent of a woman I did not know in this room. She had wept. I breathed in the distinctive aroma of love." Libra smiled at the surprise on Varda's face. "Yes, love can be sensed in a variety of ways, for it fills one's body and one's soul."

"My dreams the last two nights were good, peaceful dreams," Griff added. "Though I am nearly normal now, I still have just a trace of the altered genes. I never told you, but all those months ago, during the time we spent at the base, I could sense where you were, somehow. It is something I still cannot explain."

"How can it be possible?" Varda asked.

"We were told that we now have a unique combination of genetic material, both human and beast," Rigel said. "You know how sometimes you can instinctively realize something is wrong, and you don't know why? You know how sometimes an animal will dislike someone, and you don't know why? Perhaps the human intuition is combined somehow with animal intuition in us, creating some kind of extra sense."

"Though we mostly have the normal double-helix DNA, we also have triple-helix and quadruple-helix DNA," Libra added. "Perhaps it is the extra genetic information."

"Though not everyone seems to have this additional sense," Rigel said, looking at his wife. "I believe only twenty-two others, besides us, have similar abilities. There may be more who have them and don't even realize it."

"And I am only one of two people I know that has my specific ability," Libra said. "My brother Aries is the other. Though we always had a good sense of smell, even before we were changed, so I guess this should not surprise me. Perhaps it only heightens the natural talents you already have."

"Do you like the changes?" Varda asked, curious.

The two glanced at each other, and then Rigel spoke.

"We have not really thought about it," he said.

"We have only really thought about freedom," Libra said. "Can you help?"

Varda nodded. “Yes. My father has a plan. But it sounds like you have a plan as well?”

The older man came forward at last. His steps were soft but sure, the steps of a man unwilling or disinclined to draw attention to himself.

“Yes, I do,” he said. She was not surprised by his words, spoken nearly tonelessly. He was the kind of ordinary person that was easily forgotten, especially in the presence of someone more extraordinary. No wonder no one had noticed when he had sent out those signals. Most likely, being so unthreatening had saved him.

“Griff believes my father can help you,” Varda said.

“Yes. I would be most grateful for his help,” Orion said, nodding slowly at Griff before turning his mournful, dull eyes on Varda. “What plan did your father have?”

“I don’t know all the specifics, but he believes he can disable the wireless fence that keeps everyone in this base.”

“That will be very difficult,” Rigel said. “We had thought of doing such ourselves. Ceres has sole control of the fence. It will be powered from a place that only Ceres can enter.”

“You would be surprised at the places you can infiltrate,” Varda said, unable to contain the smile on her face.

“Not anymore we won’t,” Rigel said, laughing. Slowly, the sound died, and his voice turned somber. “I still find it hard to believe that escape is even possible.”

“Has anyone else tried to escape?” Varda asked.

“Those brought here are generally accompanied by at least one person they love—a spouse or a child, or both,” Libra said. “Three or four years ago—time has little meaning here, so I cannot be sure—one miner did try to escape. Undoubtedly he reasoned that if he just got to another base, he could inform the authorities. But before he got very far, he was caught, and brought back, and forced to watch as his wife died a painful, horrible death. I heard the man was screaming and crying for his own death after that, and I am sure it was granted to him … eventually.”

“Every few years she will torture or even kill someone, just in case anyone else is thinking of escape,” Rigel said, shuddering.

“Generally people find a way to commit suicide, instead,” Libra said. “It’s easier.”

“Sabotaging that fence would be a worthy endeavor, for it never hurts to have more than one plan,” Griff said. “Our time is running out. She visits sometimes, if only to track my progress back to normal humanity. Once the change is complete, and I fear it will not be long, I will be of use to her. And I cannot give her what she wanted so long ago, any more than I could give away my soul. I refuse to give her that.”

All five were silent for several minutes in the dingy, dusky room.

“For now, we must reveal this to no one else, except, perhaps, to Aries,” Libra said. “We do not want Ceres or her men to somehow guess that something has changed. Hope is contagious, and can be hard to hide.”

“Besides, it might be false hope,” Rigel said. “We may not be successful.”

“My father is good at what he does, and he rarely fails at anything he has ever personally done,” Varda said to Rigel. “If your father is as good as mine at what he does, it is not likely we will fail.”

“We will take your word,” Rigel said. “But now we must go.”

The two left as quickly as they had come. But before he walked away the younger man picked up a bag from the floor of the hallway—Varda had not even noticed it was there—and handed it to his father. Orion withdrew from the room as well, slinging the bag—the kind that carried a helmet and spacesuit—over his shoulder before standing just outside the door, giving them privacy for their goodbyes.

Griff drew Varda close.

“I love you, my dearest one,” he said, his voice as low as a whisper. “Those are the first words I should have said to you, for you are my family now.” Pulling her against him in the dark and dank room, he kissed her until she forgot the danger, forgot everything except what it was like when she was in his arms. Finally he released her, and her senses returned after a few delirious moments. So much time had passed. She needed to leave now.

“And I love you,” she said, touching his cheek. “But I must go until tomorrow.”

“Until then,” Griff replied.

Orion followed Varda down the corridors of the dome, as silent as he had been before, a noiseless shadow, as the two made their way toward the door that led out. Once there, he shivered, watching her touch the scanner. Then, one hand pressed to the back of his neck, one hand pressed to the

scanner, he watched as the door opened for them. With a slight gritting of his teeth, so subtle she almost didn't see it, he followed her through. There were only two flashes of white light above their heads to indicate that two people had gone through the door.

When she looked at him, he looked away.

"Even though the device has been disabled, part of me still feared I had failed," he admitted. "It is strange to realize that I am truly free now."

"Not quite yet." Varda put a finger to her lips, and Orion nodded back as he pressed his own lips together.

Once they were back in the Wind family's secret base, Varda felt more secure, and she found her eyes drawn again to Orion, and she thought of his family.

"Even after having grown up in slavery, your son and his wife have great inner strength," she said.

He looked surprised at the question, and then understanding entered his face.

"Yes, they do. Oftentimes, the captives do not even have children. Janus never minded"—his voice for the first time betrayed emotion, an intense loathing that made Varda step away—"for he preferred adult workers, and she is much like him. Both have always been able to lure them from the most desperate parts of Earth. Mostly we do not have children for fear they will be deemed unfit and … culled."

Horrified, Varda could only stare, even though it was something she should have expected.

"Yes," he said, voice grim. "My wife, dead for years now, only dared to have the one child, and only when she was older. It is hard to give birth to a child who will have less than nothing, but it is even harder to not have a child when you have less than nothing. The few we have are symbols of hope. They cannot read or write, for we have no time to teach them, but they can speak and they can listen. We share stories as we work, and it helps. Sometimes the children even fall in love, like my son and Libra. If this plan works, they hope to give birth to daughters and sons who are free."

Varda could hear the pride in his voice. Orion's face returned to quiet passivity, and he laid the bag on the floor. Following his lead, she walked over to her own suit and put it on with some difficulty.

He followed her out the way she had come, and she explained how the three medallion keys worked. Once in the cave outside the first door, she realized she had not warned Xenos.

“Father, someone is with me, do not be afraid,” she said into the communicator just before they exited onto the Moon’s surface.

Xenos was waiting inside the flyer, clearly agitated. “I was so worried,” he said, walking to her and gripping her arms. “You were taking such a long time. I feared you had been caught.”

Orion walked over to the back of the vehicle. Removing his helmet, he turned toward a very shocked Xenos. Varda knew then that he must have been expecting Griff to be there, instead.

“Is that what I think it is?” Orion pointed at the three-dimensional printer.

Xenos stared at Orion, speechless, before looking over at Varda, a question in his eyes.

And so, as the flyer flew back to Peary Base, Varda told her father the story. And soon they were home, and dawn broke over the sky simulator just as the three entered their quarters. Curled up in a chair, she listened as the two men discussed plans and robots and devices. Within moments she was asleep, and when her father looked over at her, he saw that she was smiling.

Chapter 24

When Varda entered Griff's room the following night she saw panic. Filled with fear, she ran to his side.

"I was not given a drug tonight," Griff said, and he pulled at the chains tying him to his bed. "Midnight surely must be near. That is when Ceres always came. You need to hide. Now!"

Quickly, Griff pulled Varda over to a large supply closet.

"Get inside. And whatever you hear, whatever you see, do not come out. Please."

A shelf had been moved upward, leaving a space just large enough for her to sit with legs bent, her pack on her lap. As Griff closed the door, the proximity alarm began to flash. Three people were headed toward them. Quickly, she pulled out the emergency communicator, turning on the recording function. All sound would be recorded and transmitted to her father.

Only the barest sliver of light came through the gap between the doors, and Varda leaned forward, careful not to make any noise, so she could see what would happen.

Ceres strode in, majestic and almost regal, dressed in a form-fitting white bodysuit that glittered with gems. Her ever present bodyguards closed the door behind her.

"Nothing you say can ever convince me to marry you," Griff said, his voice harsh and angry.

"Even though I can, and will, kill everyone here?" Ceres said, her voice also harsh and angry.

"I am sure you will kill them all eventually, when they get too old or too weak to be of use to you," he answered, folding his arms, the chains clanking together, the noise so loud and grating Varda could almost taste the metal.

Ceres' smile was cold and cruel. "But surely you would not want to watch them die a terrible death?"

Griff was silent, but his eyes spoke volumes.

"The power I have over these people is greater than just the electronic fence. Anytime I want I can kill everyone here." She walked over to Griff, and he pulled as far away as his chains allowed, his revulsion obvious. A

sadistic smirk filled her face. “Anytime I want I can flood this entire dome with a deadly gas. It will be a most gruesome death, I assure you.”

Rising to his full height now, Griff towered over Ceres, and he bared his teeth and narrowed his eyes in hate.

“Are you thinking of killing me?” Ceres said, mockingly. “You would kill someone in cold blood? You must be feeling such guilt over accidentally killing that one man. Even if you were capable of purposefully killing anyone, and I doubt you are, you wouldn’t dare,” she said, spitting out each word. “Even if you weren’t chained you could never escape. My bodyguards would kill you. And if I die everyone here will immediately die with me when the poison is released.”

“You cannot do that.” Varda could hear real fear as he spoke, and unease.

“I can.”

Griff was silent again, and Ceres laughed in his face. Varda had to suppress a shudder at the sound.

“I will never marry you,” he answered.

“I think you just need a reminder of how much power I have over you. I will have a guard fetch someone suitable. A child, perhaps.” She walked toward the door. Filled with horror, Varda knew she could never allow that, and she thought of the stunner strapped to her leg.

“Wait.” Griff moved forward, hand outstretched.

Ceres turned back, and nodded, as if she were a queen granting a favor to a lowly subject, and not a person who had just threatened to murder a child.

“You cannot truly want to marry me,” he said. “You do not love me.”

She scoffed. “Of course I do not love you. What kind of a fool are you? As if I could really love someone like you, someone so upright and moral and so ugly and monstrous!” She laughed again, a terrible, demented sound. “You were more attractive as a beast! At least then you were unique, unparalleled!” Her laughter died as quickly as it had lived. “And now, look at you. You are hideous as a human. Your uneven eyes give me the creeps, and your curved nose makes me shudder. At least you were well-named, Griff. Or should I call you ‘hooked nose’? Your mother was always too literal when she named her sons.”

“What about you?” Griff retorted. “You were named after a planet made of rock and ice, which was—strangely enough—named after the mythical

goddess of agriculture and fertility. Too bad you didn't take after the goddess."

Having no answer to that, she glared at him.

"Did you even have a plan to explain why I am still alive?" Griff said. "And where I have been all these years?"

"Yes."

"What is your plan?" It was his turn to smirk.

"I plan to say that you have been in hiding with me, your last relative." Ceres shrugged her shoulders and tossed her hair as she spoke. "We have spent the last two years secretly searching for the one who killed your family, and—"

"And what? You found the one responsible, and he, or she, is willing to confess?"

It was Ceres' turn to be silent.

"I assume that was your plan. I cannot come out of hiding unless the murderer is revealed. I assume you will accuse an innocent of the murders? Or have someone confess to something they didn't do?"

"And why would you say that?"

"Surely the ones who really murdered my family and all those other people are long dead by now," Griff said.

"Of course they are, Griff. Did you think I would leave someone alive that could incriminate me?" Scorn filled her voice.

"I knew you had no soul, Ceres," Griff said, and he paused and glared at her. "I didn't know you had no imagination."

Varda watched as rage filled Ceres' face, as her eyes flashed fire instead of ice.

"If you could get what you wanted without marrying me, would you?"

"Of course I would," Ceres said, the words as sharp as thrown knives.

"You want my wealth, along with the majority shares in the Medii and Peary bases, correct?"

"Yes," Ceres replied.

"Then think of a way that does not involve marriage or murder. If you accuse an innocent, you will have more blood on your hands. You would be guilty of yet another murder. And you must know that I would rather die than marry the one that killed my family. I would kill myself before that happens."

Ceres glared at him, her gaze so fearsome that Varda feared Griff would burst into flame; then Ceres turned abruptly and left. Varda began to tremble and shake in her hiding spot. After a few very long and lonely minutes had passed, Griff opened the door and pulled her out and straight into his arms.

“She is gone,” he said.

“Why did you do that?” Varda said, gasping into his chest, her fingers gripping his shirt. “That was very dangerous. You could have lied to her, you could have promised to marry her.”

“I did not want to lie,” Griff said as he stroked her hair. “And I have been a victim of hers for so long, for too long. I wanted to show her that I am no longer weak, and that I despise her for what she did.”

Hearing his words made Varda remember something that had been said, and so she pulled out her emergency long-range communicator, and pressed several buttons.

“Tell me you received what I just recorded,” she said as she tried to calm her rapid breaths.

“If you are talking about the confession Ceres just made to the murder of Griff’s family, then yes I did,” Xenos said back, his voice quiet but clear, filled with triumph.

“Then surely we can go to the authorities!” Varda exclaimed, gripping the communicator tighter. “The Lunar Group can do something now!”

“Ceres mentioned poison gas. We did not know about that. If she is arrested, I have no doubt she will find a way to release it and kill all those people. We need to free them first. Our plan must go ahead if we are to save them,” Xenos said over the communicator, and then he cut the connection.

Just then, the proximity alarm flashed its warning, and Griff pushed her back inside the supply cabinet, and she pulled the door shut, only just managing not to slam it.

“Do not come out, no matter what happens,” he said in a rush, voice barely audible.

Rattling his chains loudly—to cover any sound she made—Griff stood up and faced the door as it opened.

Ceres stood there, and Varda put both hands over her mouth in a desperate attempt to quiet her breathing, afraid she would be caught.

“Make no mistake; I will find a way,” Ceres hissed. “But until then, we can’t have you trying anything foolish.”

She jerked her head at the two bodyguards, who came to either side of Griff. One pushed him back on the table. The other went over to one of the medical cabinets and removed a small injector and a vial. Griff did not resist, and soon he lay unconscious on the bed.

The three left, and Varda found she could not even move, for it felt as though her body had stopped working.

Chapter 25

There was a muted series of three knocks at the door to Griff's prison, and then it opened again. Varda squeezed her eyes shut, and then nearly screamed when the cabinet opened and light poured inside.

"You are safe," Libra said, her voice gentle and soothing as she took Varda's hand and helped her out of the tight space.

"She is gone now," Rigel added.

"Is he … is he alright?" Varda asked. Unbending her stiff legs, she rushed to Griff's side, pushing the hair back from his brow.

"Did you see what drug they gave him?" asked a new voice.

Varda turned toward the voice, mouth open in surprise.

"I am Aries," he said. "Libra's brother."

She gave him an unsure smile in return. "Yes," she replied, and she walked over to the medical cabinet, pulling out a drawer. Dividers separated it into three sections, and she pulled out a vial filled with a smoky white liquid from the left. Laying it carefully on the bed, she removed the data pad from her pocket. A few moments later she had entered the name of the drug, and was given the name of a counteragent. A quick search of the rest of the drawers yielded the antidote.

Seeing what Varda was about to do, Libra grabbed her hand.

"Wait. We don't know if it is best to give him a second injection right now, just after the first."

"I … I want to help him." Intense frustration was all Varda could feel.

"Libra's right," her brother said, and Varda turned reluctantly toward him. "We simply do not know. Besides, we cannot free him just yet. Ceres or one of her goons could return yet again." Aries gestured at Griff. "We now know what will wake him up, when the time comes. Let him rest for now. He will be safe here. Come, we must go," he said, picking up the bag she realized she had forgotten in her hiding place. "You should stay here tonight. She nearly caught you; it is too risky for you to leave. We have a place you can stay."

After giving Griff's brow a quick kiss, and sending a message to her father, she followed the three to an even danker and darker passageway beneath the base. Pipes and wires ran along the walls, and the low hum of machinery filled the air. It was very cold, and she was glad that she had thought to wear a pair of the standard issue nanotech work clothes, the

ones she had worn months before when her family had nothing. She had really worn them just in case she was caught: with her hair tied up and under a gray work cap, she doubted Ceres—who never really looked at anyone else—would recognize her, dressed like the rest of her slaves.

Handing her the pack, Aries looked expectantly at her.

Nodding, Varda opened her bag and handed each of them a stunner and a communicator.

"Use these only if you need to in order to escape," she said, pointing to the stunners. "And use those"—she nodded at the communicators—"whenever you need them." Unzipping another compartment, she pulled out six small handheld devices, fully charged. With a handle at one end, and a curved cylindrical piece at the other, each deactivator was meant to be pressed against the back of a neck.

"Is Orion making more of these?" Rigel pocketed two of them, handing two apiece to the others.

"Yes. He is with my father in the … well, the other secret base. There are others there as well, helping out with constructing the deactivators. Seventeen people, plus the four of us … means twenty-one people to free more than three thousand people; am I correct?"

"We don't have an accurate count. A large number is out mining as well, and should be safe for the moment," Aries replied.

"So we are looking at approximately one hundred fifty people per person," Libra mused.

"There are enough here for you and one other," Varda replied. "Hopefully, you will be able to recruit more people to help, speeding up the process by giving them the extra deactivators. Orion and my father are making as many as they can. Disabling the neck chips is our first priority, and disabling the electronic fence is the second. We can do nothing about the poison."

"How will we know when to start?" Rigel asked.

"The main power in this dome will go out, tomorrow after midnight, and the emergency lights will come on. My father thinks he has it fixed so she won't know it has happened, but we should work fast, either way. Our presence should convince the others here that we are telling the truth, though I am sure there may be some who will not believe until they see someone escape, and I am convinced they will follow you then. One of you

must lead, for they will not trust a stranger. Tell everyone to pair up, to go by families, and to make sure that nobody is left behind."

Reaching into the bag, she removed two pairs of bolt cutters.

"These are for Griff's chains," she said. "I hope to free him myself, but I brought an extra one, for I do not know what will happen."

Rigel held out his hand. "I will free him if you cannot," he said, and she handed him the cutters and gave him a grateful smile.

"And I will lead them, with my brother's help, for we know most of them, and they have trusted us in the past," Libra replied. "But now we must go. We are expected at our workstations in only a few hours, and we need to rest for the day—and night—ahead."

Rigel gestured at Varda, and she followed him over to a large machine. Pulling open a panel, he moved aside, and she saw that the inside was largely empty, save for a cot and a small store of food and water and other basic necessities, plus various electronics and mechanical parts. She did not need to ask to know that this was where Orion had lived for the past few months, after he and Griff had faked his death.

"We will return as soon as possible," Rigel said as Varda climbed into the compartment.

"Try to get some rest if you can," Libra said, and she swung the door closed, plunging Varda into darkness. Footsteps echoed down the passage, and they were gone.

In the shadows of the machine, she sank onto the bed and curled up, drawing her knees to her chin. And she thought of Griff, asleep not far away, and she wished she could be at his side, and she wondered if he was dreaming of her.

Chapter 26

At forty minutes to midnight the next day, Libra and Rigel came for Varda, and she followed them into the dome. The living quarters of the captives were just as dreary as the rest of the base. Prisoners, faces pinched and pallid, stood in the corridors, whispering, clearly confused by her presence. But when Libra and Aries began to speak, Varda watched hope replace the fear, spreading as fast as light.

At thirty minutes to midnight, Xenos and Astra came with Orion, and they brought the others as well. The four Wind siblings and their spouses had come, and Giles and Filis and Novia and Tycho were there as well. Last came Atara and Ozara, who were, strangely enough, smiling and giggling.

“You are very cheerful,” Varda said to her sisters.

“Well, I heard someone say you should laugh in the face of danger,” Ozara answered, as she gave Varda two more deactivators.

“Or was that smile in the face of death?” Atara added.

“Either way, we are laughing and smiling!” Ozara said.

“Well, let us begin!” Varda said, as she caught the eye of Libra, who then began to yell out instructions to the crowd that had gathered.

They all separated, going to different wings and levels, knocking on each door. Few disbelieved, and all permitted Varda and her friends to press the deactivators to their necks. Dozens came to Varda, and she gave the extra device to a bright-eyed young girl no older than she was.

Only after Varda had freed her group did she run to the medical center, and most followed her. Already Rigel had come and gone, already Griff was awake and freed. After a quick kiss, he followed Varda, and then they heard a voice.

“Griff!”

“Mother!” he cried.

His greeting this time was longer, and when it was over, all three of them were wiping away tears. Holding hands, the three joined the surge of bodies rushing in one direction. And thus it was three minutes past midnight when they arrived at last at the door that led to freedom.

At four minutes past midnight the lights went out, and a loud shout came from all around them as so many voices rejoiced.

Hundreds had already come out, and Griff and Varda followed them, each pressing their hand to the scanner, which registered their presence and lit up when they walked through the doorway.

Once through, she turned and watched the rest as they ran into freedom.

Like rushing water, like roaring fire, the captives burst from their prison, only minutes after the power went off. Over three thousand people—men and women and children—followed Varda and Griff into the main domes that comprised Thule Base. Some walked, some raced, and some carried others too weak or too injured to leave on their own. They came by families and by groups, two by two and three by three and four by four. Through the storage space they spilled, and up the stairs to the main domes. There were so many that they filled the corridors and streets of three domes.

Once everyone had been freed—the Wind family having scanned the entire dome for life signs with infrared cameras, just in case anyone still remained—they informed Xenos via communicator, who in turn notified law enforcement at all three bases, presenting the recording as proof of Ceres' guilt in the long-unsolved murders. And soon the authorities converged on the base, shutting down the maglev trains and the hangars, so that Ceres could not escape.

Officers rounded up all those who worked for Ceres, taking them into custody, and soon they surrounded her home in Thule Base. Many of the prisoners surrounded it as well, their voices loud and thundering as they cried for justice, with Varda and Griff and Astra at the front, their voices as loud and thunderous as the rest. The sound echoed through the dome, waking all who were there, and soon weary-eyed colonists joined the throngs on the paths and the streets. Rosy dawn now lit the sky simulator, and soon each face seemed to glow in the light as they stood, all eyes on the place that hid evil.

Ceres' fortress was eight stories tall, and eighty feet wide, an imposing structure of white-painted stone and glass, with decorative spires stabbing the sky, an ice palace for an ice queen. This imposing building rose nearly all the way to the ceiling of the dome.

Ceres stood behind the transparent glass doors, her eyes and her face filled with the blackest of hate as she stared at Varda and Griff as they held hands. Varda could not help but shudder at the sight. After a few moments Ceres stalked back inside, her white, fur-lined robe flapping behind her

like the wings of a great bird of prey, and she disappeared behind a pair of white metal doors.

As the people shouted ever louder, the officers tried to beseech her to come out peacefully, but there was no answer for a very long time, and so at last, with no other choice, they came with what Varda now knew to be an override chip. The first set of doors opened, and the second as well, though it was no use, for these doors were blocked from behind by a thick sheet of titanium, and no one could get through.

Her data pad began to buzz. Confused, Varda pulled it out. An anonymous message was coming in.

“You think you have won, but you have not,” said the voice, and with a thrill of terror she recognized it was Ceres.

“We have freed your prisoners. We have already won,” Varda replied, unable to keep a slight tremor from shaking her body, and she was glad it was only an aud message.

“I should have expected you were up to something. But you seemed so innocent.” Ceres spat out each word.

Varda sighed. “I am innocent because I did nothing wrong.”

A harsh and grating sound that could only be a demented laugh came through the speaker.

“If I ever meet you again, make no mistake: I will kill you. I will kill Griff and I will kill Astra, though it seems they cannot die. Still, I will find a way.”

Ceres cut the connection, and Varda stared at the data pad before replacing it in her pocket.

“She seemed awfully certain that she could get revenge,” Varda said, looking over at Ceres’ home.

“Yes,” Griff answered. “Somehow, I believe she has already escaped. I do not know how, but I do not think she is in the base anymore.”

“Either way, we have rescued those people. We did what needed to be done. And I cannot regret it, even if she does come for us.”

“Yes. I agree.” Griff pulled her close once again.

They watched then as authorities were forced to breach the armored glass windows with a mechanical battering ram. Other officers formed a perimeter, pushing everyone away, calling for quiet, calling for silence, and then at last the glass shattered and splintered into millions of tiny, cutting pieces that fell to the ground like snow and ice.

It took hours for them to break through all the doors and search the entire building. It was all for nothing, for Ceres seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Chapter 27

It took the entire day to solve the mystery of how Ceres had escaped. After going over the building from top to bottom, and after poring over the architectural schematics for the dome, authorities at Thule Base at last solved the secret: a ladder could be electronically lowered from the top of the dome onto the roof of Ceres' home, and the ladder led to an airlock and then to a door that opened onto the surface of Thule Base.

On the surface they found over a dozen rover tracks leading away, each in a different direction. Search teams were sent out, but the darkness in the crater meant the search was slow.

And thus, it took one more day after that to solve the mystery of what had happened to Ceres. The rest of the rovers contained more of her overseers, and many fought back, injuring a number of the men and women sent to arrest them. One searcher was exposed to the vacuum on the Moon, and only the swift actions of his fellow officers saved him. Other officers eventually discovered that, after abandoning her rover, Ceres had walked for over a mile on the Moon's surface, coming at last to the lighted rim of the crater, where she had fallen into a small crevasse, and there she had died of hypoxia, having run out of oxygen. Only thirty feet away they found another crevasse, where a spaceship had been hidden.

Her death in the crater seemed impossible, and the authorities at first did not know what had caused it, until they saw her visor. The gold-coated outer sun visor on her helmet, the visor that protected one's eyes from extreme amounts of both visible and invisible light, had not been lowered once she walked from the darkness of the crater into the light. Medical examiners soon confirmed that she had been blinded by the light of the sun.

Meanwhile, there were three thousand, three hundred and four new people—two hundred and forty had been added to their numbers once those captives out helium-3 mining and water ice mining had returned—who were now without a home on the Moon, for they could not, would not, go back to their prison. The authorities, who had investigated the hidden domes beneath Thule Base, discovered the poison canisters in the air recirculation system before Ceres died. Unable to sever the electronic connection, they sent the cans into space.

They also found all the stockpiled and ill-gotten gains from the years of enslavement, and granted the former captives all of the food supplies that they had cultivated, and all of the helium-3 and water ice, plus a variety of valuable minerals and metals that they had mined over many, many years. The sale of even a third of the helium-3 alone would give them silvers that would make them wealthy for the rest of their days.

Nearly everyone required medical attention, especially the miners, who had been exposed to extreme amounts of radiation, some as many as twelve times the allowable dose. Many of them would live drastically shorter lives. Others suffered less, though they still had to deal with problems like vitamin depletion and near starvation due to their meager diet and long hours of work, for even the animal-like strength and stamina they possessed was not enough to do what Ceres had demanded from them each day. Interviews of those enslaved revealed another dark side to the devices implanted on their brainstems. Anyone who wore one could not stop work for longer than a quarter of an hour or they risked a painful shock, as well as a beating from one of Ceres' overseers. The only ones spared were children. And the only time all but a few could rest and be alone was between the hours of eleven at night and five in the morning, during which they could sleep, and during which the overseers returned to their homes in Thule.

All those who worked for Ceres in enslaving the captives were taken into custody by the Lunar Group, including the dozens that had still been in charge of the miners, captured upon their return to Thule Base. But the question of what to do with them was never answered, for they were found dead in their jail cells the next morning, as cold and as stiff as if they had turned to stone. The medical examiner found a new kind of poison in their system, one that had been in hidden capsules implanted in their mouths.

A search of Ceres' records revealed the extent to which her great-grandfather had perfected genetic engineering. It was more than the changes that had been made to Griff and the captives. All those years ago, Janus had genetically engineered a great host of diseases that mimicked deaths from natural causes. At last, the authorities had the answer to the unsolved medical deaths that had surrounded the Gold family.

The other unsolved accidental deaths were linked to Ceres' overseers, as well as a few unwilling captives whose families were threatened, and who were killed afterwards. One of the prisoners turned out to be a match for

the DNA planted at the crime scenes, and she confirmed that Ceres had kept her alive all those years just in case she needed someone to take the blame; indeed, after Ceres had recaptured Griff, she had told the woman that she would eventually confess to the murders or watch her family die.

There was also the question of what to do with all the genetically-engineered people. Though every single one of them had the device attached to their brainstems removed, just in case, the other device, the one beneath their breastbones, the one that released the genes that kept them from eventually reverting back to their fully human selves, did not need to be taken out. After much debate by all, the captives were given a choice as to whether to keep the implants, for they not only still looked human, the devices did indeed only work on somatic cells, not germline cells, so there was no possibility of the traits being passed on to any children. Half of them had the second device removed as well, but the other half kept the device, among them the miners, who would live longer if they kept it, for the genetic changes did strengthen their bodies beyond that of a normal human.

Afterwards, there was much debate among those on the Earth and the Moon about what to do with the newfound knowledge, for such genetic engineering was illegal, and the methods by which the information had been gained were not only illegal, but immoral. But in finding ways to kill humans, he had also found ways that could heal humans. The curse could be changed into a blessing. Varda guessed it would be years before the issue would be resolved.

Most of the prisoners chose to return to Earth, though it would take months to transport so many people with relatively few extra spaceships. Four hundred and twelve—including Orion, Libra, Rigel, and Aries—took the offer from Griff of a permanent home at his base on the far side of the Moon, where they would live in his castle, filling the hydroponics and aquaponics bays to capacity, bringing life to it once more. The rest were offered a chance to make a new life at Medii, where workers would build eight new domes with the riches the slaves had taken from Thule.

And on the twenty-first day of the third month, on the day he reached his nineteenth year, and on the first day of spring, Griff proposed to Varda again, and she accepted.

Meanwhile, the story of Ceres' evil spread to the four corners of the Moon and the Earth, and it was all anyone on the talk net discussed for

weeks. Soon everyone knew the truth, and Varda and Griff and Astra and Xenos made plans to return to Earth, if only for peace and quiet.

But before they left, Varda and Griff felt they needed to do one last thing to put the ghosts to rest.

Despite Ceres' fame, there had been none to mourn her at her funeral. All her followers deserted her, as quick to break away from her as they had been to gravitate to her. She was eventually buried in an unknown place on the Moon, so none could desecrate her grave. Still, the new couple—whose lives had been shaped by her actions—could not forget her, and so, on the seventh day of the fourth month, they walked the dusty path that Ceres' had walked on her last day of life.

The craters of eternal night were deep and dark, and the two—dressed in spacesuits—walked with only two small lights to guide them. It was a long and lonely journey through the shadows, and it seemed to take forever. Eventually, the lighted rim appeared up ahead on the horizon, an image of hope, like the sun's first glow just over the horizon after a long night on Earth. Gold-coated visors down, they crested the ridge, walking from darkness to light.

The Earth seemed to rest on the edge of the Moon, so close that Varda imagined she could touch it if she walked far enough. The sun, a glowing white orb, was higher in the sky. The gray surface of the Moon gleamed, as bright as silver or gold. Standing there, gloved hands clasped, the two were silent as they gazed at the strange unearthly beauty.

"It seems so strange that it ended this way," Griff said. "When she threatened us, part of me expected that she would find a way to have her revenge."

"She would have escaped, but for that last foolish mistake," Varda replied.

"I have been wondering about that. I do not think she had ever spent much time on the surface of the Moon. And, like me, she had always lived on the bases here. The false 'sun' we have on the sky simulator is nothing like the real sun. One can look at it all one desires."

"It may have been the invisible light," Varda said. "The Earth's atmosphere protects against that. Even if she didn't look directly at the sun, the infrared light could still blind her before she even realized what was happening."

“That is a terrible thought. Even I did not wish such a fate on her, though I cannot be sorry that she is dead.”

The two said nothing for several minutes.

“What do you think she felt during her last moments?” Varda asked, turning toward Griff, not really expecting an answer.

“I hope she felt remorse,” Griff said. “Remorse can lead to repentance. And I hope she felt rest, true rest, at last.”

“I thought it might be hard for you to pity her.”

“I do pity her. I have always pitied her, for she has never felt love. She has only felt hate,” Griff said, pausing for a moment. “She has only allowed herself to feel hate and envy, ignoring anything and everything else, convinced love and sacrifice were both unworthy.” He looked toward Varda then, holding out his gloved hand. She reached forward and grasped it, pulling him close. Behind the visor his face was hidden, reflecting her own helmet back at her, a shining gold image within gold.

“Either way, she spent her last moments in darkness,” Varda replied. “The last thing she saw might have been the sun’s light. Perhaps its beauty gave her comfort, at the end. I hope it did.”

He nodded, and he turned to go back to Thule Base, holding her gloved hand tightly as they walked back into the darkness. She walked beside him then, the two lights they held piercing the darkness ahead, the two lights in their hearts as bright as the sun, as bright as stars.

Chapter 28

On the eleventh day of the fourth month of the year 4004, on a day that for many symbolized death into life and sorrow into joy, and a year and a day after Xenos had first set out on his journey to retrieve his missing cargo, Varda Adara Gray married Griff Arvad Gold.

The two wed at the Gold's home on Earth, when the world seemed fresh and green and new, for spring had dawned on the land. The first buds and blooms had sprung over every hill and valley, smelling like hope and love. Varda was clothed in the wedding gown her mother had worn, a lovely dress of white, stitched with silver vines and four and six-rayed stars. She had altered it, embroidering green leaves and adding pink roses made of ribbon around the neckline and the edge of the skirt. Griff was clothed in a suit of Varda's design, with black coat and pants, the lapels and cuffs stitched with gold vines and green leaves, and the gold waistcoat was stitched with deeper gold stars.

But only a few were there on that day to see the lovely bride and the handsome groom. Astra and Xenos, Atara and Polux, Ozara and Pluto, Novia and Tycho, Filis and Giles, and the Wind family were all there, and after the ceremony each one came up to congratulate the newly-wedded couple.

Astra and Xenos stood in front of them in the receiving line, somewhat uncertainly it seemed.

"We want you to be the first to know that we are going to be married," Astra said, and a slight blush lit her cheeks.

"We could not be happier," Griff said, embracing his mother, before turning to clasp Xenos' hand. Varda saw that her father was also blushing, and she shook her head slightly.

"Who could have ever guessed that a lost cargo ship would lead to this!" Xenos said.

"Who could have ever guessed that our families would be doubly-joined!" Varda responded, joy in her face, and she moved to embrace her father and Astra.

"We will be married at the Stars Gala this year, thirty-seven years after the night we first met," Astra said, and she gave Varda a kiss on her cheek before the two left, hand in hand.

Her sisters and their beaus came up next.

“You will never guess the news!” Atara said, as she pressed her hands together in excitement, Polux standing behind her, his own hands clasped behind his back.

“Of course they have guessed!” Ozara corrected her, and Pluto nodded.

“I know, but isn’t that what people are supposed to say?” Atara responded. “Even when they know the person has guessed the news?”

“Congratulations to all of you,” Griff responded, giving a quick embrace to his new sisters-in-law, and a handshake to his future brothers-in-law.

“Blessings to all of you as well!” Varda said. “I could not be happier. But I hope you will pick a date later this year for the weddings. I could do with a break from sewing all these elaborate gowns!”

“But you do miracles with such little time! Designing your dress and his suit in only three weeks,” Atara said. “I still can’t believe you did it. Well, I can, but every single time you seem to surpass yourself.”

“And our gowns won’t be that elaborate,” Ozara added, as she fiddled with the new ring on her finger, her head lowered in what seemed to be embarrassment.

Varda rolled her eyes and then shook her head, her long brown hair swishing over her back like gently blowing air or like softly falling earth.

“Of course they will be even more elaborate,” Atara said, smiling at her sister and rolling her eyes.

“I could never guess that!” Varda said, laughing, and they all joined her, voices merry and full of music.

Next were Novia and Tycho, who had finally returned to Earth.

“Let me guess: you are going to have your first child,” Varda said, shaking her head again.

“How did you know? We have told no one yet!” Tycho was clearly astonished, and he looked from his wife to Varda, and then back again.

“I did not know!” Varda was flustered now.

“I did know,” Griff added. “Your wife has that glow of new life about her. I can see it in her eyes, in her face. It is quite wondrous to behold. There are few things lovelier.”

“Thank you, I think.” Novia’s cheeks began to glow pink in embarrassment.

Leaning her head to one side, Varda studied her new husband. “You don’t still have some sort of ‘beast’ sense, do you?”

“No,” he answered, a little uncertainly, as the puzzled young couple walked away.

Filis and Giles came up to offer their own felicitations.

“Is it true what we have heard?” Filis said.

“You are really selling your shares at Medii and Peary?” Giles said.

“Not all of them. My mother and I will still keep ten percent each,” Griff said. “I think the fact that we owned so much was too much of a temptation for Ceres, and it may be for others. The Moon was meant for all of humanity, not just a select few. Besides, selling will give me more funds to build a maglev train line between my old base, which we have named White Base, and Medii Base.”

“And with the influx into the economy of all that hoarded helium-3 in Thule, I am afraid the other miners were understandably upset,” Varda said. “At least until we offered them better-paying, safer jobs building the tunnel needed for the train.”

“And we are thinking of expanding to other sites on the far side of the Moon, extending the reach of the colonies,” Griff added. “None of this news is common knowledge yet.”

“That will probably take a lot of your wealth,” Giles said, clearly surprised.

“Most of it, yes,” Griff answered with a nod and a self-deprecating shrug of his shoulders. “It will be worth it. We need more colonies, and more people involved.”

“I wonder what will happen at Thule Base?” Varda mused. “Ceres had no heirs, no family.”

“She has been linked to terrible crimes, crimes against humanity. And we’ve all heard the latest news: an immense graveyard, filled with bones, the bodies having been cruelly recycled. It is the stuff of nightmares,” Giles said, and paused, clearly still filled with horror, and it was a few moments before he could continue. “I believe half of Thule’s shares will be given to her victims, to do with them what they will, and the other half will be sold, and some of the proceeds will be used to change the hidden base to a memorial for the thousands upon thousands who lived and died there over the years.”

“And here we are, talking of sorrowful things, on a day of joy!” Filis lamented. “We are so very sorry. You must think we have no tact!”

“*Gaudete cum laetitia, qui in tristitia fuistis*,” Griff said, and Giles and Filis looked at him, clearly puzzled.

“It means: ‘Rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow.’ It is a Gold family saying, and since I have joined the Gold family, I guess it is mine too,” Varda said.

“We must remember the sorrow, because it makes the joy more precious,” Griff said. “Indeed, without sorrow we would not truly be able to appreciate joy.”

After the newly-married couple said their last goodbyes an hour later, having greeted all their guests, they walked between the trees until they were at the top of the nearby hill, alone together at last, the only sound the whispering breeze.

There they watched as day turned to night, as the sky above them changed from clear to pink to gray to black. They watched as the stars seemed to light one by one in the sky, and they watched as the moon rose, half in shadow, half in light. Beneath them was the home where his mother had lived for years, believing herself alone, and before them was the home where Griff had lived for years, believing himself alone. And the two of them simply stood there, arm in arm, in the darkness after twilight.

At last, Griff turned to Varda, pulling her close to his heart.

“Are you truly happy, with me?”

“Why would you ask such a thing?” Varda turned so that she faced him, so she could look into his eyes, and she did not bother to hide her astonishment.

“Ceres found me ugly. And I must agree that I am not the most handsome man in the world,” he admitted as he looked at the ground, running his hand through his short-cropped, still spiky hair.

“But you are the most handsome man to me,” Varda said, as she tipped his head up with both hands until he was gazing at her. “You are still the beast I fell in love with, still the man I fell in love with. I need only to look into your eyes to see who you are, who you have always been, who you will always be.”

“And you have always been, and always will be, my beautiful rose,” he replied.

Varda smiled at him, a look of hope and promise on her face, and just a little mischief. “There is a secret I never told you,” Varda admitted.

“What is it?” Griff’s eyes sparkled with amusement, and Varda felt her whole body warm under his gaze.

“I have a thing for hairy men,” Varda whispered as she leaned close and gently stroked his newly-grown beard. “Just don’t tell anyone.”

He laughed, the joyful sound echoing all around them, and her voice soon joined his.

“Of course, my dearest,” he said, pulling her close. “I would do anything for you. For you are the one for me.”

“And you are the one for me.”

“What is that old saying? About going east of the Sun and west of the Moon? Do you remember that I once said it to you?”

“Yes,” Varda said, smiling. “It is an impossible place that is both nowhere and everywhere. It is an otherworldly place that is as unreachable as the horizon, where earth and sky meet, but it still exists. It is the joining of two hearts, linked together by something beyond understanding, but understood by all.”

“Love,” Griff said.

“Yes,” Varda replied, and then she kissed him beneath the light of the Moon.

* * *

About the Author

Jodie Seibert has worked for a newspaper since even before she was a teenager, so it seemed a fitting career for her once she graduated from college with a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications. Her current career is caring for—and chasing after—her husband and children, as well as writing when she can find a spare second—she would love some more if you could share them. Though born in one of the largest cities in the Midwest, she loves living in an ordinary small town in the heart of America, right next to a church and a field.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
About the Author